



BOOM!

They thought he knew his place...they were wrong.

Chapter 1

SCOTLAND

‘WHAT THE FUCK?’ The man in the passenger seat opened his eyes. A gaggle of bemused sheep had forced me to slam on the brakes, causing his head to bounce off the side window. ‘Sheep.’ I said, somewhat unnecessarily. He rubbed his head and stared out of the window as we set off again. ‘Where the fuck are we?’ I shrugged. ‘Heading towards Auchter something.’ I said. I’d been at BBC Scotland for over a year, and the many small towns and village names weren’t tripping off my tongue fast enough for my Glaswegian colleagues. I’d been working on regional news programs which were shot on film over the course of a week. They usually involved driving for miles to somewhere I’d never heard of, and couldn’t pronounce, though I had Glasgow and Edinburgh off pat.

The news stories generally focused on farm activity or local politics. I’d been assisting Alistair MacGroot, the sound recordist since arriving in Scotland, and was finally being allowed to work on a major drama. Despite my piss poor pronunciation, I was popular with most of the sound recordists in the film unit. Not because of any particular technical skill, but

for one simple reason. I didn't drink. Despite being a Sassenach, a derogatory term for a Saxon, I was a rarity to be exploited. It was the 80s, and with heavy drinking and few women on the staff the atmosphere was thick with toxic masculinity.

There were only two females in the unit, both camera assistants, and more than able to fight their corners. I was just glad that my skills as a teetotaler were appreciated.

Alistair rubbed his eyes and swivelled his neck around. His eyes were bloodshot, and his nose bore the reindeer patina of a heavy drinker. He looked at me with pity. My sense of direction was legendary. I didn't have one. The combination of that, and my unfamiliarity with the area was a price they had to pay if they wanted to capitalise on my sobriety. 'Auchtermuchty.' Alistair ground out between his teeth. He shook his head. 'When I went to sleep Loch Leven was on my right...' I shrugged, 'Mine too...' He shook his head again. 'And now it's still on my right.' I looked at him. 'What side would you like it on?' He sighed, lifted one cheek of his generous buttocks and let out a loud fart. I wound the window down to release the toxic fumes. 'I don't want it on any side.' He said. 'We should have left it behind hours ago. You're going in a circle.' I thought about this. I'd seen too many lochs over the past month, and the

views, though attractive, looked pretty much the same. ‘I came off the motorway and followed the signs to Kinross, like you said.’ Alistair groaned and rubbed his eyes again, as if it might remove his view of the loch, and the significance of its continued appearance. ‘I said you should head towards Kinross, not circle it.’ ‘I looked at the fuel gauge, something I’d had to do more frequently whilst travelling around the desolate highlands. It didn’t go down well if you ran out of fuel in the middle of nowhere. It was half full. So, one thing less to worry about. ‘Well I thought it was a short cut.’ I said. To be fair, my mind had wandered off down some fantasy cul-de-sac where I was a famous director sat in a chair with Mike Sloan – Director, embossed on the back. Alistair slapped the dashboard with his hand. ‘Great, the only thing that will be short will be food if we don’t get to the hotel before the sparks. And we won’t get the best rooms either.’ I’d soon learned that getting the best rooms was a fixation with sound recordists. Part of it was the need to have the most sockets available to charge up the numerous walkie-talkies, and the rest was down to snobbery. Who had the biggest room, or the best view, maybe a bath instead of a shower. Considering that most of the crew crawled in from location, had a bath, something to eat and then spent the next five hours in the bar before crashing out in their rooms, I didn’t think the quality of their surrounding should have been all that important. But what did I know.

I was getting tired of Alistair's moaning, so decided to add a bit of reality to the situation. 'I know, why don't you give up drink for the rest of your life, then you can do all of the driving while I curl up with a book in the passenger seat.' I watched Alistair's limited thought processes as they found themselves between a rock and a hard place. 'You cheeky wee monkey.' Alistair finally came up with. Shaking his head and laughing. 'Tell you what, get back onto the motorway and put your foot down and we could be in Auchtermuchty within the hour. I'll buy you a nice glass of lemonade at the bar.' I nodded. 'Buy me a fresh orange juice and it's a deal.' I accelerated as briskly as the Citroen Safari Estate would allow, and with a sense of Deja-vu soon left the sign for Kinross behind and joined the M90.

Chapter 2

I sat in the bar and watched the electricians take it in turns to try out their best chat up lines on the barmaid and the solitary female camera assistant nursing a glass of water and concentrating on trying not to look bored. We exchanged sympathetic looks, two non-drinkers adrift on a sea of scotch whisky. One of the electricians, Andy Scoon, sported a Burt Reynolds moustache, boots, and a black cowboy hat that never left his side. He fancied himself in pole position with Jenny, the focus puller. I knew that was a delusion on his part. Jenny was determined to become the first camerawoman in the department, and sleeping with an electrician wasn't part of her career path. She wasn't a complete non-drinker like me, but there were certain jobs you couldn't really carry off while drunk. Focus puller being one of them. Jenny already had a full-time job keeping an eye on her cameraman, the legendary Norman Dalgleesh. It wasn't his camerawork that was legendary, but more his ability to put away copious amounts of whisky and still remain upright. He may have been able to remain upright, but

that didn't mean he could operate a camera with much success after a heavy night. Jenny had soon learned to spot the signs. If Norman was still wearing the clothes she'd seen him wear the night before she knew it would need all of her skill to get through the day. Zooming and pulling focus wasn't easy, but if she could lock the tilt mechanism and keep an eye on the frame, with a bit of luck she could manage to get through it without too many re-takes. When things did go wrong she would have to pretend she'd lost focus or run out of film, to cover for him. Alistair and Norman were a bit of a double act, and Alistair would sometimes claim he needed to reload the Nagra tape machine when he didn't to buy Norman some time. This was all well and good, but they weren't doing regional news now. Tomorrow would be the first day of one of the most ambitious dramas BBC Scotland had ever attempted. A famous Hollywood director had been signed up and the cast contained three or four big names. I'd heard the budget was over a million pounds, the amount normally spent on producing a year's worth of drama. Alistair and Norman were laughing down at the other end of the bar. The barmaid, a well-endowed blonde who'd seen it all before was smiling at their jokes. They'd been drinking for over two hours and either she found them funny, or she was a good enough actress to give notes to some of the people I'd worked with over the years. I saw Jenny looking at her watch. The first day on set was always the most difficult. The enforced

collusion of many departments, technical crews and artists, some of whom had never seen each other before was always a dangerous mix. But the biggest unknown was always the Director. In this case the problem was already known. Johnny Cruz an English director fresh from a stint in L.A had directed numerous successful American TV shows, and was used to working on high budget movies. He'd already overspent on all of the department budgets before they'd shot a frame of film. The series was called Catching the Wolf, a dystopian cold war series set within an alternate Scottish history. It involved soldiers, helicopters, heavy special effects and large amounts of dialogue. Theresa Adriana the lead actress was known to be temperamental and difficult to handle. She was also renowned for her turbulent love life. I drained my glass, smiled at Jenny and headed across the bar. Jenny slipped off her stool and joined me as we headed out. She nodded back to the bar at Norman and Alistair. 'That's an accident waiting to happen right there.' I smiled. 'The accident happened a long time ago, we're just the latest paramedics on the scene.' We headed up the stairs. 'The yank director is going to flip out if there's a fuck up with the dailies.' Jenny said. 'That's an understatement. He's been freaking out at every pre-production meeting for the past six months. He's like a baby who wants more toys all the time.' 'If we can just get through the first day, maybe Norman will realise he's playing with fire coming onto the set half cut.'

Jenny said. I fished out my keys and opened the door. Inside, the red charging lights from dozens of walkie-talkies winked in the gloom. Jenny peered past me. ‘I see you got a good room.’ ‘Yeah right, I’ve got my own red-light district going on here.’ Jenny paused. Fluttered her eyelids and spoke in a bad cockney accent. ‘You want company luv?’ ‘I thought you’d never ask.’ We stumbled through the doorway and I kicked the door shut behind me. We weaved our way past the chargers and fell onto the bed in a heap.

CHAPTER 3

The loud buzz of the alarm competed with the low throb of the battery chargers. I rolled over and slapped the alarm off. Jenny was already gone. Not one for long drawn out goodbyes. We'd been friends for over a year now and come to an uncomplicated arrangement. Our clandestine meetings a physical release along with an exchange of views about past mistakes. It was difficult enough being a minority in the camera department without having your relationship under the microscope on top of everything else. The situation worked out well, though recently I'd noticed some unwanted feelings surfacing when she'd told me about her latest conquest, or possible suitor. I wondered if it was the green-eyed monster of jealousy, but quickly dismissed the thought. We were friends with benefits, and that's the way it would stay. I started to put the walkie-talkies together,

numbering them on strips of white camera tape, and pairing them with holsters and belts. I would tick the users off using the call sheet and give them each a number. Handing them out was easy enough, getting them back in was a nightmare. Belts and holsters went missing, the units were abandoned in production cars, in toilets or taken home. As a sound assistant I hated the fact that we'd been given the responsibility for the production's communication system. At a point in the day when everybody wanted to get away as quickly as possible we were left trying to wrangle the equipment back from twenty or thirty people spread over the location. It was something I was determined to change. I hadn't worked exactly how I was going to achieve this revolution, but felt sure I soon would. I loaded the walkie-talkies into a ruck-sack, picked up my boom-pole and headed down to reception. Andy Scoon was chatting to the receptionist. His hat planted firmly on the desk. The girl was young, probably a trainee. New enough not to have heard all of the chat up lines at least. I went over and handed her my key. 'There's a change of schedule.' She said, handing over a sheet of paper. 'Thanks.' I looked down at the sheet. 'Shit.' I mumbled under my breath. Scoon looked over. 'It's a bugger isn't it. Just what you need, starting the shoot with the biggest scene. We won't have a bloody light left in the trucks by the end of the day.' I nodded. 'Yeah, we'll end up shooting day for night unless we get some kind of miracle.' I looked at the sheet. It was the

worst-case scenario. The scene started outside before moving inside. They could literally film all day and all night. With the full cast on set, loads of extras, military personnel, jeeps, trucks and helicopters employed for the exteriors the potential for a fuck up was unlimited. I carried the ruck-sack over to a chair on the other side of reception, dumped it on a tatty sofa and propped my boom against the wall. It was now 07:15. I'd agreed to meet Alistair in reception at 07.00. The caterers would already be serving breakfast on location, and I knew they would be struggling. Normally there would be a second unit to provide food for all of the supporting artists which would mean less queuing for the crew and production unit. But with the sudden change of plan it would be a free for all around the one catering wagon. Jenny left her key at the reception desk and headed towards me. 'Where are they?' She said, sitting down next to me. I looked at my watch. 'Alistair was meant to be here fifteen minutes ago.' Jenny looked at the call sheet in my hand. 'You've seen it then?' I nodded. 'We don't have enough walkie-talkies, caterers are going to freak out and we'll probably be filming all night. The last thing we need is two heads of department going AWOL.' Jenny stood up. 'I'll get the receptionist to ring their rooms.' She went over to the receptionist who was handing over a scrap of paper to Scoon. He picked up his hat and winked at Jenny as he went past. 'Can you call room 21 and 25 for me please.' The receptionist

nodded, picked up the phone and dialled a number. She listened, cut the phone off and dialled another number, listened, shook her head, and put the phone down. ‘No reply, maybe they’re on their way down?’ ‘Thanks’ I said. Jenny came over to the desk.

‘What’s up?’

‘No reply from either room.’ This wasn’t good news. Wardrobe and make-up had left earlier in a giggling flurry of bags and suit-carriers. They were usually the first on set and the last to leave. They were one of my favourite departments, as not only did they have their own costume and makeup truck, but if you were lucky they also had a coffee machine. The faster I could rig a radio mic, the more time I had to chat and sponge a coffee off them. My rigging speed soon earned me the nickname of Radio Mike, which made a welcome change from Sassenach. I looked around the empty reception. I’d be lucky to get breakfast this morning, never mind a coffee. ‘Where the hell are they?’ Jenny asked. I thought back to the other times they’d been late. Usually it was sleeping through an alarm, falling asleep in a bath, and in some cases getting locked in their room. An unwelcome thought jumped into my head. An image from the previous evening. The smiling barmaid listening to their jokes. ‘Shit.’ What is it?’ Jenny asked. ‘The barmaid.’ I got up and went over to the receptionist. ‘Hello, can you tell me something?’ I paused. ‘It might sound a bit weird.’

The receptionist smiled.

‘Weird is pretty normal when a film unit is staying here.’

‘Yes, you’re right. Er, I don’t suppose you know where the barmaid lives do you?’ The receptionist looked at him. ‘Not really your type, is she?’ I shrugged. ‘No, it’s just, well, we appear to be missing two of our colleagues...and...’

She shook her head. You think they might be with...oh yuk.’ She wrinkled her nose. ‘That’s not a picture I want in my head.’ I agreed, it wasn’t something I wanted either, but without Alistair and Norman there would be no pictures and the entire shoot would grind to a halt. ‘So?’ I said. She leaned forwards.

‘Well you’re in luck. She’s having some building work done at her house so we’re putting her up in one of our rooms until the works completed.’ ‘So, she’s staying in the hotel?’ I said. The receptionist nodded. ‘Room 101, top floor.’

CHAPTER 4

Alistair sat slumped in silence as I drove to location. My mind flashed back to the horror of the morning's events. After pounding on the barmaid's door and getting no response I'd used the key the receptionist had given me. The door jammed on a loose shoe, and I kicked it clear. The predominant smell was of old socks and vomit. It looked like someone had emptied a suitcase full of clothes into the room from a great height and then thrown up over the resulting mess. The barmaid was first to open her eyes. Her blonde hair stuck up on one side of her head and her mascara had run. It made her look as if she'd been in a fight and sustained two black eyes. But this wasn't the worst part of the view. Either side of her lay Alistair and Norman. I could just see Alistair's nose glowing against the white pillow where it poked out from beneath the sheets. Norman was still

under the sheets and snoring loudly. I looked at the downcast eyes of the barmaid. ‘We need coffee, and lots of it.’ I said.

I drove as fast as was safe down the winding road towards the location. The production manager had put a few signs up overnight so I managed to avoid getting lost. We’d finally forced enough coffee into Alistair and Norman to restore some of their basic functions, talking, walking and swearing being the most successful.

As the original schedule had originally been a two-handed interior, Alistair and Norman had counted on a leisurely start while the set was dressed and lit. With that logic in place, copious amounts of whisky and an obliging barmaid, the scene had been set for the farce of the century. Aggie, as she was called, found herself in what turned out to be a slumber

sandwich, rather than the wild ménage a trois she had originally imagined. Unable to wake the sleeping duo she had drifted off to sleep only to be awakened by me pounding on the door hours later. I looked over at Alistair. His head lolled against the window like an ugly Garfield sucker toy. We were headed for Kinross, the interior location was an old stately home. An experienced production manager could usually find a large home in need of refurbishment and strike a deal with the owner. Sometimes it was an arrangement to redecorate the house after filming, and other times it was cash in hand to bump up the coffers. I'd spent a few days assisting the second unit on a period drama that used Lochleven castle as a backdrop. During the filming I was told that Robert the Bruce had come across by boat to the castle. I was glad we were more land based than Lochleven. Getting to the castle by ferry on a daily basis would have become tedious.

I pulled up at the gates and a security man waved me through, we drove up the long drive and swung round behind the house to a small parking area. The generator had already taken pole position and I knew that we would lock horns with the gaffer over the low-level sound problems it was certain to give us at some point.

The gaffer on this particular job was Colm O'Docherty a large Irishman, florid faced and wide of gut. He and Alistair had had

many run ins with him on locations throughout the highlands. Colm would have reversed the generator into the sitting room of a location if he could have got away with it. He'd been on my comeuppance list for some months. But this was not the time for that. Normally we would have been on location early enough to ensure the generator was parked a distance from the interior filming areas, but because of Alistair's lurch into Don Juan territory and subsequent late arrival we were in a weak negotiating position. I wasn't going to risk a confrontation between a hungover Alistair and a belligerent gaffer on the first day of filming. An AD came over, his walkie-talkie fizzing with activity through the earpiece. His name was Johnny Fisher and I'd worked with him on several television shows. He'd been the second AD on my first days filming on a comedy show out on a windswept field in Fintry, Stirling. It was a godforsaken location in winter and I'd spent many hours sitting in the car or trapped in the hotel while wind, snow or rain howled across the landscape. Johnny bent down to the driver's window. 'You're going to have to unload I'm afraid, space is a bit tight.' His eyes flicked across to the human shaped heap in the passenger seat. He sniffed. Sizing up the problem. He looked at his watch. 'If you promise to move it down to unit base at lunchtime you should be okay. My main problem is the cruz missile.' It hadn't taken long for the American director to gain his nickname. Destroying the budget before they'd even

started filming was bound to cause problems, and there was certainly no sign of any special relationship on the set that morning. ‘Why?’ I asked. ‘Well, for a start it was his idea to start the filming with the biggest scene in the shoot...he’s already overspent everyone’s budget, and moving this scene up means we’re all scrambling to catch up.’ I nodded, it was always the case, if you changed things at the last second there was always a financial hit. Artists that had been booked on the day and then cancelled, artists that thought they were not needed being rushed in at the last moment. But I thought there was more to this move than stupidity, and I said so.

‘I think this is part of his plan.’ Johnny looked at me. ‘You think the guy has a plan? From where I’m sitting he’s a fuck up.’ ‘Yeah, he’s that alright, but he’s also a cunning fuck up.’ In what way?’ Johnny said. I looked over at Alistair. He was still asleep and drool was running from his mouth. ‘Today’s scene will use a huge amount of the budget. We’ll lose the light faster by shooting six weeks earlier than planned. It’ll mean more overtime and lights to shoot day for night. The helicopters, army personnel and firearms all have to be provided ahead of time, extra caterers for this evening...it’s probably a third of the budget right there...’ ‘So, if he screws up they’ve already spent too much to risk sacking him. He’s covering his own back.’ Johnny said. ‘Yes.’ I replied. Johnny’s walkie-talkie crackled. He held up his hand as he listened. He looked at me, shook his

head. Pressed send. 'Okay, Joey, do the best you can I'll get an AD to pick up the supplies.' He clipped his mic back onto his belt. 'What's up?' I asked. 'Caterers are running out of food, one of my AD's is doing a supermarket run.' Damn, there goes breakfast.' Johnny smiled. 'Lucky I got them to put a couple of sausage rolls aside for you and sleeping beauty here.' I could feel my mouth starting to salivate. 'I owe you big time Johnny.' He nodded. 'Remember that when you try and catch up on wild-tracks before wrap.' 'You got it Johnny.' He banged the car roof and I drove over to a space I could reverse into. Page one of the getaway early from location plan was to make sure your escape route from the car park was clear. I started to unload the Citroen and began to assemble the sound cart. Alistair jerked awake. 'Shit. What time is?' 'Eight o'clock.' 'Bollocks, we've missed breakfast.' 'Not quite. Camera crew are doing some second unit stuff across the Loch. Johnny's had a couple of rolls put aside for us at the caterers. Why don't you go down and get a coffee and pick up yours.' 'Okay, I won't be long.' He climbed out of the car and stood leaning against the door, rubbed his eyes and yawned. 'Mike, about last night...' 'Forget about it.' I said. 'What happens in the hotel stays in the hotel.' Alistair smiled and walked stiffly towards a stone archway and through to where the caterers were set up. I wheeled the sound cart through the main entrance and fought my way into the room next to the one we were using as a set. Though we were filming

outside first it was always best to nail down a prime position inside. Trying to set up later while the set was being dressed and lit was a recipe for disaster. I set up the mixer and laid some cables until I was happy with our position. I looked around the room. Checking for obstacles like hanging lights, mirrors, reflective pictures, light sources through windows and any of the many other hazards I'd spent my career navigating through.

Out of all the sound positions I'd held, from 3rd assistant, to Boom-op and mixer, booming was by far the most difficult, and satisfying. Most departments needed a grasp of their own job as well as a working knowledge of the other departments. To a certain degree we were all interconnected. But in my opinion booming was more closely linked to the other crafts than most. I had to know the frame size of every lens the camera department could be using, including the zoom lenses. When and where every actor was going to speak. Be able to avoid every light that could throw shadows around the set, and not fall over the scenery. I had to deal with grumpy actors first thing in the morning, negotiate with wardrobe and make-up to fit concealed radio-mics, and make sure the right fabrics were chosen in the planning stages. No matter how many rehearsals we were allowed, and sometimes we had none, anything could change at the last second. Whereas actors only had to learn their own lines a boom-op had to know all the lines, and sometimes

the first time they would hear them would be on the day. Radio mics had changed the game in a big way. Directors were starting to use multi-camera set ups far more, shooting wide and tight at the same time, effectively shutting the boom-op out. Some days I felt I was going to become a dinosaur on the film set. This didn't worry me as much as it should have. I'd always thought of sound as a stop gap while I worked out what I really wanted to do with my life.

‘Well if it isn't my favourite sound man.’ The cheery voice of Roz, the continuity girl rang out across the room. I turned to see her lugging her combined bag and seat into the room. Roz was a striking red head who always wore colourful earrings and a smile. She was outstanding at her job and many a budding director owed her a debt of thanks.

‘So they finally let you out to play with the big boys.’

I put down a cable I was holding and gave her a hug. ‘And girls.’ I said.

‘Less of the big.’ She replied looking around the room. ‘I imagine we won't be filming in here for a while.’ ‘If ever. I take it you've done the timings for today's schedule?’ Roz looked at her sheets.

‘My favourite breakfast reading.’

‘And what did you come up with?’

‘A minimum eighteen-hour day...and that's assuming there aren't any resets during the battle scenes.’

It was as I'd thought, we were heading into a black hole. 'How are you getting on with Cruz?' Roz put her seat down. 'Well we certainly have a special relationship.' I looked at her. 'Really?' She shook her head. 'No. He seems to think I'm here to applaud when he comes up with a suggestion. Problem is, all of his suggestions either make the scenes too long, or mess up the cutting point. God help the editor.'

'I take it they're still doing second unit beauty shots?' 'Yes, I let Moira take that over, I have enough on my plate with damage limitation on the main unit. Have you had breakfast?' 'No.' I said. 'There's a sausage roll with my name on it at the caterers, unless Alistair's had it.' 'Better than nothing, tho' I think there's some porridge left. And what happened to Alistair and Norman? They both looked in need of defibrillators when I last saw them.' 'They had a bit of an adventure last night, and now we're dealing with the consequences.' I said. 'Ohh, I do love a bit of gossip. Let's go pick up your roll and you can tell me more over coffee.' We walked out of the house, across the garden and the car park and through an archway to where the caterers were parked up. A small queue of extra's and runners waited impatiently at the serving hatch. They were down to toast, scrambled egg, porridge and coffee. We went around to the side door of the truck and I nodded at Terry, the owner of "GET IT DOWN U" caterers, and an old hand. 'What do you

want?’ He said with a grin. ‘I think Johnny put a roll aside for me?’ Terry nodded and opened the hot cupboard. ‘I doubled the order, which was lucky because Alistair gave Norman yours.’ He handed me a small bundle wrapped in foil. ‘Thanks.’ I said. ‘No problem. As soon as I saw the new call sheet I knew it would be a shit storm. I’ve put the call out for another truck but I’m still waiting.’

I peeled back the foil and bit into the sausage roll. ‘Well if nothing turns up some hapless runner is going to be trying to get a hundred pizzas from town in the middle of the night.’ Terry shook his head. ‘Yeah, that’s not going to help our situation. We’ve already used up a week’s worth of breakfast supplies. We’ll be lucky to get back on track until after the weekend. That Cruz guy is a nightmare, he got a runner to ask us for wholemeal bagels...who the fuck eats a bagel for breakfast?’ ‘I think that’s a New York thing.’ I said as I demolished the second roll. Terry nodded. ‘Well maybe he should fuck off to New York and get some.’ I’d had some experience of American directors and actors. It seemed that if an English director asked for a pencil you would give him one, but an American director would be offered a choice of colours. We had a gaffer called Kyle that had worked in L.A for a while and his truck was a wonder to behold. He had a diving suit, bee keepers hat and tons of other sophisticated equipment so that whatever the director

asked for he could give him a choice. ‘Sadly, I don’t think he’s going to fuck off.’ I said. Terry looked at me. ‘Well then we’d better hope he has some kind of accident because the way he’s behaving he’s likely to bankrupt BBC Scotland.’ Roz nodded. ‘He’s not wrong, one of the special effects guys said he’s already spent over £1500 on a model corpse which is only in shot for a couple of seconds.’ ‘Guy’s a nutter. Anyway, I’ve got to find five loaves and two fish if I’m going to survive lunch.’ He smiled and went back to work. ‘Looks like the second unit’s back.’ Roz looked past the catering truck at a small convoy of approaching vehicles headed towards them up the main drive. ‘Okay, I’d better go and see if Alistair’s back in the land of the living.’ ‘Good luck.’ Roz said, scooping up a banana from the food table and heading off. I made my way back to the car park and looked around. I could just make out a figure through the misted-up windows of the Citroen. I went over and tapped on the windows. A hand slowly wiped the glass clear and Alistair stared up at me through bleary eyes. He reached over and turned the ignition on. The window slid down. ‘How’s it going?’ he managed. His voice phlegmy with sleep. ‘Second unit’s back, they’ll be setting up for the forest scene in the next hour. There’s no scripted dialogue, and we can track the gunshots and fx after they’ve finished shooting.’ I knew there was no point in recording a guide track as the noise from the tracking vehicles and the techno crane would interfere with any live sound. The

supertechno-crane 50 was a massive telescopic crane that could reach a camera height of over fifty-feet, with thirty-seven feet of extension. It worked on track or its own rubber wheels. A massive weight block travelled down the crane arm providing a self-balancing system. I was a big fan of anything that was overly large or technical, as it always ensured lots of hanging around giving me down time, and snacking opportunities. The downside was that it was difficult, if not impossible to get clean sound above the noise generated by the grip, his assistant and the mechanical drive on the crane. ‘You can cover that can’t you?’ Alistair was looking at me, his face doing an impression of a sad beagle. ‘I imagine I’m up to recording a few wild tracks. If anything changes I know where to find you. I’ve left the mixer and the 4.2 set up on location.’ I unclipped a walkie-talkie from my belt, turned it on, set the squelch and slid it onto the dashboard. ‘It’s on channel three so you’ll hear when they start setting up. I’ll use the IS, I’m not buggering my back up. It’s going to be a long day.’ Alistair nodded. ‘Okay, sounds like a good idea. I’ll get my head down and snatch some sleep.’ I went around to the back of the car and pulled out the Nagra IS. It was a small, two channel tape machine that weighed less than ten pounds. It had become popular with older recordists who had developed back pain due to working in the field with the heavier and larger Nagra 4.2 model. I collected a Sennheiser 415 microphone in its wind gag and slammed the boot. I heard

Alistair grunt at the sudden change of air pressure and smiled to myself. Serve the bugger right. I plugged the mic in, slung the recorder over my shoulder and started walking towards the location.

CHAPTER 5

I followed the cables and protective plastic duck boards towards the woods. A small marquee had been set up at the outskirts for make-up and wardrobe, and somewhere for the artists to relax. Not that they were going to get much time for that. I saw a man wearing army camo with his face smeared with dark make-up. He walked out of the marquee and moved over to the urn sitting on a table that had been set up by the caterers. He upended a coffee flask and a thin black gruel trickled out into the polystyrene cup he held under the spout. He swore, and dropped the cup into the bin. An empty biscuit tin added to the air of misery laid out in front of him. ‘For fuck’s sake.’ I heard him say. ‘How’s it going?’ I asked, nodding towards the woods. The man shrugged. ‘Fucking chaos. I was meant to be doing a commercial today until they bumped up this schedule. Should have told them to piss off, at least I would have got a cup of coffee out of them.’ ‘Yes, everyone’s been caught on the hop. It only takes one person to upset the whole applecart. Have you met the director yet?’ The man smiled. ‘Cruz? Yeah, he’s got

the charisma of skunk.’ ‘Seems that way.’ I said. ‘And he’s also got one of those dumb accents that people put on when they’ve been in the states for a while.’ I nodded. ‘Mid Atlantic?’ ‘Yes, what a wanker. Just because he’s done a few movies for the yanks he thinks he’s lord muck.’ I indicated his face. ‘I think you’re ahead of him on that score.’ He smiled. ‘Too true, it looks like this is going to drag on.’ ‘Yes.’ I agreed. The sparks were wrestling lights through the trees and cabling them up. Lugging the heavy chokes from trolleys and hiding them behind the trunks. It was a thankless task as you never really knew which way the camera was going to shoot. From my point of view, it just added an annoying whine to the background noise which further prevented me getting any meaningful sound. ‘We’ll probably end up shooting day for night. They’ve got tanks and helicopters on their way. It’s going to be a riot.’ The man looked around. ‘We’ll let’s hope they sort the catering out or I’ll be leading the riot.’ ‘Don’t blame you. Good luck.’ He nodded and headed into the woods. I looked around and spotted the grips truck. They’d been setting up the techno-crane and I could see the track glinting in the lights deeper in the woods. I followed the shouting of the sparks and the clank of track being laid until I reached the crane. I got there to find Willy, a dour wee Glaswegian and chief grip, sitting on a wooden box drawing heavily on a cigarette, his cheeks bulging like a bullfrog. He didn’t look happy. ‘How’s it going?’ Willy blew

out a cloud of smoke and watched as it drifted through the trees behind him, seeming to summon up the energy to speak. ‘The man is a complete cunt.’ I guessed this could only be one man. ‘Cruz?’ I ventured. He spat. ‘We just laid a hundred feet of track, and it was a bastard I can tell you.’ I looked at the track that stretched into the woods, imagined levelling it all as it passed trees and climbed over roots. ‘And just as we’re finishing up, the bastard arrives clutching his special mug of coffee, looks around and says he wants to shoot the other way.’ He shook his head and sighed. ‘What a cunt.’ I’d worked with Willy on many difficult shoots but I’d never seen him so dispirited. Changing the order of shooting to start with the biggest scene of the shoot was mad enough. But upsetting so many people in such a short span of time was a recipe for disaster. I looked around at the crew. Searched the faces of the sparks and the small clusters of extras, there wasn’t a smile to be seen. A megaphone crackled and the First AD started to speak. ‘Okay everyone, listen up. They’ll be a tank arriving shortly and we’re also expecting a helicopter later in the day. I apologise for all the hanging around, but as you know there was a last-minute change in schedule and we’re still catching up.’ I heard one of the extras mumble behind his hand. ‘Tea and coffee wouldn’t hurt.’ Vic, the First AD smiled, the first one I’d seen that day. ‘Obviously we have some issues with the catering, but reinforcements are on their way.’ A grizzled old

extra smiled. 'That's what they said to Gordon at Khartoum.' The extra's laughed. Vic continued. 'Okay. Tea and coffee will be here soon and then we'll have a run through of the various action pieces.' The extras milled about before heading towards the table outside the marquee to await fresh flasks and hot water urns. I saw Roz sitting on her ever present collapsible seat at a small table behind the grip's truck. I wondered over and slid the IS from my shoulder, resting it against my foot. 'I see you've got the prime spot as usual.' She looked up. 'Ha! I don't think there are any prime spots on this shoot. I expect you heard Willy's opinion.' 'Yes, there was a lot of the 'c' word.' 'I imagine. They spent all morning laying and levelling the track, and then he swans up and wants it all changed.' 'He must have a very small fan club by now.' I said. 'Yes. I've been going through the shot list and I don't think it's remotely possible.' She held up a piece of paper. I looked at the list and my heart sank. 'Just getting the tank and the helicopter into position will take forever.' I said. Roz put the paper back into her folder. 'Exactly. Do you remember that night shoot in Aberdeen when we just wanted a man on a bicycle to go past a dustbin and have a fox slink off?' I remembered it well. It was a freezing cold night shoot and it took over an hour to do a ten second shot. 'How could I forget. I was wearing four hand warmers and I still couldn't feel my toes.' Roz flicked through some polaroid's of the actors and stopped at a picture of a young girl in her 20s.

Her name was Lena Durham, she was starting to become known, but still displayed the fragility of youth and needed a lot of encouragement and emotional support. ‘How’s she doing?’ Roz pursed her lips. ‘Not good. I was at the rehearsals in Edinburgh and Cruz was a complete bastard. Nothing she did was right for him. He’s a misogynist prick.’ I’d heard varying reports of Cruz’s treatment of actors, especially women, but there was something else going on here. ‘Word is he’s having an affair with Theresa. I think because Lena is younger and prettier than her he’s making her life hell to appease Theresa.’ ‘That makes sense...unless.’ ‘Unless what I asked. ‘Well what if he’s having an affair with Lena and is being cruel to her to cover his tracks.’ We thought about that for a moment. ‘I think we’ve both seen too many episodes of Dynasty.’ I said. Roz put a bulldog clip onto the pile of polaroid’s and slipped it into a pocket of her canvas seat. ‘Oh God, I hope so, that’s the last thing we need on top of everything else.’ There was the sound of an approaching helicopter and I could just make out the small approaching dot in the distance. ‘This could ours.’ The dot grew larger, and the sound became louder. The craft swept around in a circle before landing on the lawn in front of the house. It was a Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk on trial at the RAF fast jet base at Lossiemouth. Somehow favours had been pulled in and the BBC had managed to wangle the use of it for a day’s filming. Five or six soldiers jumped out of the open mid-section,

ducked low, and ran across the lawn. I remembered back to when I'd worked on a news story in Lebanon, and how we had all ducked when leaving a helicopter, even though the blades were much too high to have done us any damage. I thought at the time it must have been some deep genetic coding stretching back to prehistoric times when pterodactyls roamed the earth. As I watched the blades increased in speed and the machine was soon airborne again. It banked left and roared over us, the downdraft threatening to knock us off our feet, as it climbed back above us and disappeared into the distance. The soldiers ambled towards the catering truck. Roz stood up and grabbed her polaroid. 'Where are you going?' I asked. 'Just need to get some continuity snaps.' she said. I smiled. 'Is that really necessary, after all they're not featured in the scene. Roz winked. 'I do love a man in uniform.' And with that she trotted off across the lawn towards the approaching soldiers. I watched as they stood stationary while she took snaps of them all. Roz was the kind of woman that told it like it was. Her job was to make sure that the director and editor got the coverage they needed to produce the finished drama. An inexperienced director relied on continuity to make sure they stayed on track during the shoot. But recently he'd noticed more and more directors viewing continuity as an intrusive presence that stifled their creativity. He'd seen Roz's position gradually eroded by a new breed of directors that thought they knew it all. Time and

time again he'd watched as Roz tried to point out flawed story logic or instances of crossing the line, only to be silenced by dismissive comments from the director. They'd spent many hours over a drink analysing the way they saw the industry going. Mike envisaged a future where multitrack machines would become smaller and find their way out of the recording studios and onto location. Along with multiple radio Mic rigs the term 'sound mixer' would then become a distant memory. With the increase of multi camera shoots coming out of the studios and onto location it was becoming impossible to keep a boom out of shot.

'Why the long face?' Roz appeared by my side. 'Just wondering if we're becoming dinosaurs.' I said. She looked at me. 'Amen to that. Today's directors would rather waste ten minutes watching video playback than listen to me.' It was true. Especially on commercials. The agency would sit in front of the monitors listening to their headphone feeds, munching snacks and reading magazines. And then after many takes one of them would spot something they didn't like that had been shot hours early. I looked at my watch. It was already mid-day. It looked like we wouldn't be turning over till after lunch. 'I'm starving.' Roz wandered over to her canvas seat and rummaged inside. She pulled out a canteen and a packet of biscuits. 'Jaffa and coffee break?' 'You're a lifesaver.' She produced two plastic

cups and poured white coffee into them. ‘Sugar?’ I nodded and she clicked some sweeteners into the cups and handed me one. I took a proffered Jaffa cake and munched it gratefully. ‘Page one in the surviving location book, use the loo before you start, and bring your own rations.’ I reached across towards the Jaffa cakes. Roz moved them out of my grasp. ‘Don’t push it.’ Roz said, before handing me the packet. I scooped another biscuit from the packet and took a swig of coffee. ‘What time do you think we’ll finish?’ Roz shrugged. ‘It’s not scheduled as a night shoot, so who knows. From what I’ve seen of Cruz so far he thinks the entire unit is his personal toy box.’

I’d seen that sort of behaviour before, usually on commercials. Sometimes what had been scheduled as a one-day shoot had gone on for 24 hours and I’d fallen asleep at the wheel in front of a traffic light on my way home. At least they were on location and didn’t have to drive too far, but working all day and night wasn’t a prospect he relished. There was a deep rumbling and the ground shook. In the distance a pall of black smoke rose into the sky and he heard the dull clank of metal treads getting nearer. In an explosion of sound, the scream of a twelve-hundred horsepower, twenty-six litre Rolls Royce diesel engine heralded the arrival the MK1 Challenger Tank. The main battle tank of the British Army it weighed in at 64 tonnes

with a top speed of 35mph. I'd been inside one of them while working on various commercials for army recruitment. It was an impressive machine. It's gun barrel swung round in a menacing arc. I saw the techno crane swooping above the machine practising it's moves. Vic bellowed through the megaphone. 'First positions, let's run through that again then we'll break for an early lunch.' I looked at Roz. 'Might be an idea to get down to the caterers and avoid the rush.' Roz said. 'I should really get some timings off Moira...oh fuck it. Let's go.' As the Challenger's engine roared and it reversed back through the woods we made our way down to the caterers.

The second catering unit had arrived and a disparate line of extras, already snaked away from the serving hatch. We headed for the first unit caterers feeling like royalty. Terry looked down his nose at us. 'You do know I can't serve you till the official break.' I knew this was the case, but I also knew that Terry was playing with us. 'Of course, but being diabetics, we really need to keep our sugar levels up, so whack out a couple of lasagne's and we'll say no more about our human rights.' Terry shook his head and grinned. 'Why do I put up with you Sloan.' He said as he dipped a serving spoon into the glutinous mass filling the large container in front of him. 'I guess it's because I give you

all the used batteries at the end of the day. And I have far too much on you.’ He slapped two portions of lasagne on our plates and handed them over. ‘That’s the problem with you teetotal bastards, you never miss a thing, do you?’ I took a mouthful of the lasagne and savoured it. ‘I admit it, I am a pious bastard on the drinking front. But where would all you legless buggers be without me to drive you home when the pubs shut. Speaking of which, have you seen Alistair yet?’ Terry shook his head. ‘No, but if he’s in the same state as Norman I expect he’s still where you left him.’ I took another mouthful of lasagne. ‘This is one of your best Terry. Could you wrap a portion up on a plate and I’ll take it to him.’ Terry busied himself filling another plate and wrapping it in foil. ‘Thanks for the compliment, but most of my customers could eat a scabby headed horse between two mattresses by the time lunch comes around.’ This turn of phrase was classic Terry, and was greatly helped by an almost impenetrable Glasgow accent. ‘Ah, but it’s the way you serve the horse that makes it special.’ I said as he handed me the foil wrapped plate for Alistair. He reached behind the counter and handed Roz a small foil parcel. ‘For your your friend.’ ‘Thanks Terry.’ Roz pocketed the package and added some salad to her plate. ‘We’d better get a move on. Don’t want Vic to see us queue jumping.’ We headed towards the car park to sit in our cars and get some heat into us. There wasn’t a dining tent. Like everything else it had fallen foul of the last-minute scheduling.

We reached the car park and I headed towards the Citroen. ‘You can join me if you like.’ Roz smiled. ‘It’s a nice offer, but considering the state of Alistair’s guts I think I’d be better off in my own air space.’ She had a point, if he’d been in the car since we arrived I could probably throw a couple of Mallaig kippers through the window and serve them ready smoked for breakfast. ‘Fair point. I’ll see you later.’ Roz headed towards her miniscule pink fiat 600 and manoeuvred herself through the driver’s door. I heard a plaintiff meow as she closed the door behind her. Roz never travelled anywhere without taking her precious Persian cat Mufti. Complete with its fake fur lined basket and hot water bottle beneath an old cushion, it was a constant source of amusement to the crew. I turned back to the Citroen. Alistair was still slumped against the window. I put the plates on the roof and eased the driver’s door open. I reeled back from the stench. It exceeded my worst fears. I opened the door wide and waited for the atmosphere to clear. I heard a dull crack as Alistair farted, and then his eyes slid open. ‘Jeez it’s cold.’ I fumbled my keys out of my pocket, reached in and started the engine. I scooped up the two plates from the roof and slid behind the wheel. ‘How are you feeling?’ I didn’t have to ask the question, I’d seen healthier looking corpses. I handed him the foil wrapped plate and a fork. He straightened up in his seat and peeled back the foil. ‘Terry’s special lasagne’ I said as I tucked into mine. He stabbed his fork into the lasagne and

wolfed down a mouthful before replying. ‘Mmm, that’s good. I’ll feel better once I’ve got something inside me.’ He looked across at me. ‘How’s it going on set. I could hear Vic shouting through the megaphone from in here. And that tank makes a helluva’ noise.’ ‘Yes, not much point trying to get any useable sound at the moment. I can get some tracks later if we need them. We still haven’t shot anything.’ Alistair looked at me. ‘Christ, really?’

I nodded through a mouthful of lasagne. Reached over to the walkie-talkie sitting on the dashboard and turned it up. I imagined Alistair had turned it down so he could get some rest.

‘Yes, Vic’s just running through the action while we wait for God’s gift to directing to appear.’ Alistair licked the last of the lasagne from the plate. ‘What the hell’s he doing?’ I shrugged. ‘I think he’s back at the hotel rehearsing the artists.’ ‘That doesn’t make sense, we probably won’t even get to the interiors the way things are going.’ ‘When I say rehearsing, I’m not being strictly accurate.’ Alistair looked at me through bloodshot eyes. ‘I don’t understand.’ ‘Well, not wishing to speak ill of the dead, but there’s a strong chance he’s rehearsing one of the actresses in the way that you and Norman were involved with a certain barmaid.’ Alistair groaned and rubbed his face, trying to flush some colour into his pallid complexion. With his skin drained of colour and his bulbous red nose, he was doing a good impression of the Stephen King ‘IT’ book cover. ‘Oh God...it

wasn't just a bad dream then?' I gave him a smile. You couldn't remain pissed off with Alistair for long. He was just his own worst enemy when it came to drink. But it was so endemic in Glasgow when I arrived that as long as you could do your job blind eyes were turned. 'I'm afraid not. But you've survived so far, maybe you're still a few mugs of coffee short of a human being, but we're getting there.' 'Coffee, that sounds like a good idea...I don't suppose a wee nip would be in order...hair of the dog and all that?' 'That particular dog's bald right now, best we skip any wee nips until we've knocked today's schedule on the head.' Alistair slumped back in his chair. 'Coffee it is then.' He opened the passenger door and dragged himself upright. Stretching his back and wrapping his arms around himself, before rubbing his hands together. 'If you're quick there might be some spotted dick left to have with that coffee.' I said. Alistair zipped up his anorak. 'Sounds good.' I looked around the car park and waved at Roz. She looked through the window and I saw the white head of Mufti her Persian cat peering out inquisitively. She gave me a thumbs up as she caught sight of Alistair. There was no sign of any AD's and I decided to leave the sound car where it was for now. We reached the caterers and Alistair ordered a spotted dick with extra custard. 'Oh hello, I didn't know we were expecting the cast of the living dead.' Terry said as he drowned the spotted dick with custard. 'Very funny.' Alistair said. 'I just have a wee headache.' Terry handed

the bowl to him. 'Here, that'll put hair on your sporan.' We found a couple of empty canvas chairs and sat down. Roz had finished her photo session with the soldiers and arrived back at the caterers thumbing through them with a smile on her face. 'Get all their details?' I said. Roz smiled. 'Oh yes. I know they're only here for technical assistance, but you can bet your bottom dollar the director will try and get them in front of the camera, and if that happens I'm ahead of the game.' 'You're always ahead of the game.' I said. Roz took a swig of coffee. 'Not on this shoot. If they keep changing the shooting order it's going to play hell with my notes.' 'Where is the director anyway?' I asked. Roz nodded at the soldiers queuing in front of the caterers. 'According to them he made a big fuss about riding in the helicopter with them.' 'So where is he?' 'They told him that a civilian wasn't insured to travel with them and he's have to be picked up separately.' I looked up. A distant drone grew louder. I recognised the sound of the Black Hawk as it approached. 'Speak of the devil.' The helicopter did a gut-wrenching swoop around the grounds before banking and settling down onto the lawn. The side door slid open and a man in camos jumped down and was immediately sick. Roz smiled. 'Not exactly the *Apocalypse Now* entrance I imagine he'd planned.' 'No.' I said. 'I'm surprised he didn't ask me to play *Ride Of The Valkyries* as he landed.' I watched as a runner scuttled up to the director with some tissues and a cup of water.

Cruz wiped his mouth, took a drink of the water, spat, and threw the cup and tissue onto the ground. The runner scooped them up and darted off. ‘The twat has landed.’ Roz said. Vic wandered past and came to a halt alongside us. ‘Great, that’s all I need, my lunchbreak ruined on top of the mess I already have to deal with.’ ‘Maybe he’ll be too sick to carry on and we’ll have get another director in.’ I suggested. ‘That sort of happy ending happens in the movies, just not this one.’ Vic’s walkie-talkie crackled. ‘Go to three for Vic.’ He plugged in his earpiece and switched the frequency on his Motorola to three before listening. ‘Great. Okay, I’ll get someone over there to talk her down.’ He switched the frequency back and unplugged his earpiece. ‘Problem?’ I asked. ‘Kind of. Lena is refusing to be in the same room as the director. Seems there was some kind of friction between them at the rehearsal.’ Roz and I looked at each other. ‘That’s not good.’ I said. Vic shook his head. ‘No, and that’s an understatement. You’ve worked with Lena before haven’t you?’ Vic asked. Looking at me. ‘Yes.’ I remembered working with her on one of her first jobs. She’d been in a small children’s drama based out of Ealing Film Studios. I’d been impressed by her natural performance and professionalism on set. We’d become friends and I’d told her she had a great future ahead of her. It was a future that was still some way off, but the last thing she needed right now was to get a reputation for being difficult; even though the difficulty was with the director and

not her. But she wasn't a star, just an unknown actress coming up against an abusive and misogynist director. Something all too common in the industry. 'Any chance you could have a word with her?' Vic asked. 'I don't want to be caught between her and the director.' I said. Vic shrugged. 'I can see that. But she needs a shoulder to cry on right now, and if she doesn't come around he'll just recast and that'll be bad for her, and the shoot. But it's your call.' I thought about it for a moment, I was just going through the motions. I didn't really have a choice. My default position on set was to prevent the abuse of power whenever I could. As a Boom-Op I was pretty far down in the food chain. But I'd discovered over the years, that there were many invisible ways to manifest power on the set. The film making universe was composed of many interlocking and interdependent components. All of which could be subtly altered to produce an impact. Like the ripple effect of a stone dropping into the still waters of a lake. It could be something as simple as an artist's mic being live during an unguarded moment, or a mic dropping into shot when an actor was struggling to remember their lines. There were many symbiotic relationships, unspoken agreements and subtle signals that ran like dark currents beneath the surface on set. Did they really lose focus? Was there a drop out on the tape? Did the radio-mic battery go down? There were myriad ways to control the ebb and flow of a film's schedule or an actor's ascent through the

ranks to stardom and fame. 'Okay, I'll go and have a word.' I said. Vic smiled. 'I knew I could count on you. I'll get a runner to drive you back to the hotel. We've still got to shoot the exteriors and finish the lighting on the interior so you have plenty of time. If anything changes I'll let you know.' Alistair said 'I'll run guide tracks if needed.'. 'Okay, show me to my chariot.' I said.

CHAPTER 6

The artists were booked into an old country house converted into a hotel and run by Best Western out at Glenrothes. It had a gym, a large lawn and ample parking. Perfect for housing artists and production. The crew were spread around the smaller hotels nearer the location. Lena was on the second floor. I headed up the stairs, passing rows of badly painted landscapes until I arrived at her room. I gently knocked. ‘Who is it?’ Lena’s voice sounded strained and fragile. ‘It’s Mike.’ ‘Oh.’ There was the click of the lock sliding back and the door opened. Lena stood in the doorway. Her eyes watery, her eye shadow smudged. She wiped her nose with a tissue. ‘So, they’ve sent the big guns in?’ I shook my head. ‘No, they were busy. You’re stuck with me.’ ‘Come in.’ She headed back into the room. ‘Do you want a tea, or a coffee? I’ve drunk all the hemlock I’m afraid.’ She still had her sense of humour, which I took as a good sign. ‘I’ll have a coffee if you are.’ She went over to the small machine in the corner of the room, snapped a capsule into the slot and punched the bottom. She went and sat in an overstuffed chair on one side of the large room that looked over the gardens, her eyes distant. I sat opposite. The gurgle of the coffee machine loud in the silence. ‘You can’t let him win.’ I said softly. She sniffed and

wiped her nose again. ‘It’s not a competition, or if it is, I’ve chosen not to compete.’ ‘I understand, maybe we need to look at it from a different perspective.’ The coffee machine stopped its noise. She got up and went over to it. She didn’t need to ask how I took it. Two sugars and milk. She made two cups and brought one over to me, placed it on the table in front of me and went back to her seat. ‘The perspective is, he’s a bullying little shit.’ I took a sip of the coffee. ‘I agree, and as such he needs to be educated.’ She looked at me and smiled. ‘I can’t let you fight my battles. It’s up to me to deal with the situation.’ I nodded. ‘I understand that, but it doesn’t harm to have a little support.’ She took a long slug of her coffee. ‘You really are a Robin Hood character, aren’t you?’ I shrugged. ‘From a financial view I wish that were true...’ Lena looked at me. ‘I can imagine, but I mean from a power point of view I’ve seen things happening on set when you’ve been around.’

‘Things happen all the time on film sets, it’s a very expensive set of dominos. It only takes one person to kick a piece over and the whole thing can go sideways.’

‘Oh, I know that. It’s just that sometimes someone trips on a piece and other times it gets kicked.’ Lena was every bit as smart and intuitive as I’d suspected when I first worked with her.

‘Well obviously there are ways of getting things done, of re-aligning a situation to ensure a fairer ending.’

Lena nodded ‘A re-distribution of power?’

‘Restoring the balance, yes.’ I said.

‘But you’re a Boom-Op, the medieval equivalent of the man that picks up the horse droppings from the Kings horse on set...the king being the director.’

I smiled. ‘That is the prevailing view.’ I said.

‘But not where you’re concerned.’ She said.

‘We’ll sometimes you can get a lot more done if you’re invisible.’ Lena thought about this for a moment.

‘But you need me to play a part in this...re-distribution of power.’

‘Yes. Romero Cruz has got away with behaving like a dictator for too long. He needs to be taken down a peg or two.’

‘I can’t be the only actress he’s bullied. Why hasn’t anyone come forward and complained?’

‘Because he only gets away with it by bullying the young and up and coming actresses. He doesn’t go up against established stars.’

‘So, you want me to go back onto the set?’

‘Yes. We need to use his own power against him. He thinks he’s untouchable. When you believe yourself to be that powerful it can become a weapon against you.’

‘But what are you going to do? Whack him on the head with the mic?’ I smiled. ‘That would be too good for him.’

CHAPTER 7

The runner drove us back to set, parked up and led Lena towards the make-up and wardrobe Winnebago's parked behind the house. I watched her go and walked round the house and towards the wood where the preparations were being made for the night-shoot. The special effects department were rigging up the explosive squibs for the battle scene. The tall figure of Sheldon Price towered over the proceedings. At well over six-feet with piercing eyes and a shock of silver hair he had been in the business for decades and worked on numerous big budget features. Two of his department were running cables to the explosives fixed on some of the trees in the wood. 'How's it going?' I asked. Sheldon smiled. 'Same as usual, too much to do and not enough time. We were meant to be doing this in a couple of weeks and that all went belly up overnight.' I nodded. The last thing the special effects department needed was a rushed job putting people in danger on the set. I looked at the small circular charges that Sheldon was connecting. They were something I hadn't seen in action before as usually they were rigged by the time I came onto set. But with the change in schedule everybody was scrambling to catch up. All I really needed to know was if they would make a sound worth recording. 'So how do these work then?' I asked. Sheldon smiled and looked at me.

‘I’m afraid they’ll sound like a very mediocre firework as far as you’re concerned.’ I nodded. I was used to that. I’d always ended up doing guide tracks and leaving it up to the dubbing mixers or the track layers to add proper sound effects where needed. Sheldon tapped the small circular charges. I’m wiring these up in case we have to trigger them manually, but they’re designed to be triggered by the actual projectiles.’

‘What sort of projectiles?’

‘Well it’s meant to be an assault by tanks, so to give the illusion of shells flying through the air we’ll be launching heat seeking model missiles, they cost a bloody fortune but the yank wants it to look as realistic as possible.’

I nodded. If there was one thing Cruz seemed to be good at it was spending a department’s budget.

‘I’ll make sure I’m not smoking a cigar when they shoot that scene.’

‘That would be wise. You’d get a nasty bruise if one of those buggers hit you.’ Sheldon said.

END SCENE

I walked back with Lena towards Unit Base. I could see the ambulance snaking its way down the long drive leading from

the house. There were no lights or sirens, though I was sure Cruz would have argued for them. Superficial bruising tho' painful wasn't exactly life threatening however you looked at it.

'Well that was a bit weird.' Lena said.

I nodded.

'These things happen.'

She looked at me. A grin spreading across her face.

'What? They found eight hand warmers in his anorak. No wonder those missiles made a bee-line for him.'

'He's been moaning about the cold ever since he arrived. I can never get any wild tracks done because there's always a space heater roaring away somewhere.'

'Well wardrobe didn't give them to him. When I asked for another one they told me someone had nicked all theirs.'

She came to a halt.

'And another thing. The FX guys said someone had tampered with the sensitivity control. If someone had been smoking a cigar they'd probably have had their head taken off.'

'No chance of that, only Alistair and Norman smoke cigars and Cruz has banned smoking on set.' I said. But Lena looked unconvinced.

'Maybe. But don't you think it's a bit odd?'

'I didn't know you were into conspiracy theories?' I said.

‘Not normally, but after our little talk this would seem to fit perfectly into your kind of Robin Hood ethos. And to be fair, it couldn’t have happened to a more deserving cause.’

I turned to her.

‘I suppose it might look that way. And after the tirade of abuse he was screaming after the accident, I very much doubt he’ll be coming back anytime soon.’

Lena nodded. ‘I guess not. I won’t shed crocodile tears for him that’s for sure. He was a creep.’

I couldn’t disagree with her. His misogynistic treatment of Lena and women on the set in general, was bordering on abuse. I’d spoken to one of the sound crew on his last big blockbuster and he’d told me that Cruz had been advised to take a job in Europe until things calmed down after a slew of complaints. I could only hope that he might have got the message that his behaviour wouldn’t be tolerated over here. I remembered looking into his eyes when I had a quiet word as he was loaded into the ambulance. I was glad to see a look of fear on his face. But before he could say anything the paramedic slammed the door shut and walked round to the front of the truck.

We continued walking until we reached her car. The engine was running and the driver was sipping on coffee from a polystyrene cup. Lena tapped on the window and the driver nodded. Lena kissed me on the cheek. And I gave her a hug.

‘I guess I’ll see you again soon?’

‘I hope so. I heard the first AD talking on his mobile back there. It sounded like they had someone lined up to take over from Cruz.’

‘That wouldn’t surprise me. The completion guarantors need to get filming fast otherwise it’ll cost them a fortune.’

‘Money talks.’ I said. The driver walked round the car and opened the back door for Lena. She chucked a small holdall into the back seat and slid into the vehicle. She closed the door and slid the window down.

‘Okay. That’s me. You look after yourself. And keep your bowstring tight.’ She smiled and the window slid back up as the car pulled away. I saw her facing looking out at me from the back window. I could see she was still smiling and then the interior light went off and the car soon became a speck in the distance. I continued walking towards the caterers. The night was cold and I needed a coffee inside of me before we packed up. I smiled as I thought back to Lena’s comparison between me and the man who cleaned up the shit from the King’s horse. It was an apt comparison, but if it allowed me to deal with shits like Cruz, then I was happy to shovel shit all day.

THE END

Mike Sloan

will return in BOOM! II