

PAPA RATZY

***Sex, Violence &
Straddled Chainsaws***



Book 6 of The Implosion Saga

STAN ARNOLD

Papa Ratzy

Sex, Violence & Straddled Chainsaws

By

Stan Arnold

Copyright © Stan Arnold 2016

ISBN 9781370870394

Stan Arnold has asserted his right under the Copyright Designs and Patents Act, 1988 to be identified as the author of this work. This novel is a work of fiction. Names and characters are the product of the author's imagination and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely co-incidental.



Mick and Jim are two incompetant Soho corporate video makers, who drink too much, don't earn enough and get too many death threats.

Novels by Stan Arnold

They Win. You Lose.

Daring Dooz

Sea View Babylon

Vampire Midwives

Botox Boulevard

Papa Ratzy

Papa Ratzy

Sex, Violence & Straddled Chainsaws

1

Halle Berry stepped into the spotlight. Her voice was as clear and as beautiful as ever.

‘And the nominations for Best Original Screenplay are: Steven Spielberg for *The Life and Times of Yevgeny Abramovich Baratynsky and his dog*. Quentin Tarantino for *Nunnery Apocalypse. Who’s a Cheeky Boy, Then?* based on the recently discovered screenplay by John Wayne. And finally, *Vampire Midwives* by James Redfern Chartwell.’

Halle was handed the golden envelope. She held it in front of her. The TV broadcaster’s switchboard was inundated with complaints that the envelope was blocking the view of her cleavage.

Unaware of the nationwide upset she was causing, she nervously opened the envelope. The audience was pin-drop quiet. This was particularly true of table 47 and two of its occupants, video cameraman, Michael Selwyn Barton, and the aforementioned, sound man turned scriptwriting sensation, James Redfern Chartwell.

At any event lasting three and a half hours with free champagne, they’d normally have only been able to hazard a guess as to which continent they were on. But tonight was different. Tonight they were drinking chilled water. Even so, their mouths were dry. Because this was *it*.

Halle surveyed the expectant ranks of Hollywood’s finest, and her eyes sparkled.

‘And the winner is - James...’

The rest of her sentence was drowned out in a roar of approval from the 3000-strong audience. Jim stood up. His mouth hung open. Mick hugged him and the cameras flashed. They both had tears streaming down their cheeks. As Jim made his way to the stage, Robert de Niro jumped out, pumped Jim’s hand and slapped him on the back.

‘Thanks Bob,’ said Jim.

‘Anytime, Jimbo,’ said Robert.

There was no doubt that a large part of the success of *Vampire Midwives* was down to Robert’s powerful portrayal of the bearded, transsexual matron, Cydney.

Jim walked on towards the stage. As he looked up, he could see they were playing the opening scene on a huge screen.

The Yorkshire night nurse, played by Cameron Diaz, was, despite a startling set of incisors, speaking the immortal lines, ‘Ee bah gum, sithee matron, another of them gradely little, no-year-old snacks just popped out of yon lass’s belly.’

As he continued to thread his spotlight way through the tables, the cheers rang in his ears, the backslapping and handshakes continued, and his mind raced through the amazing events that had led to what he hoped would be the first of many Oscars.

Six months' earlier, in their lino-clad office, Mick and Jim had sagged down into their hammocks and agreed that *Vampire Midwives* was a dud. They'd half-heartedly hawked it around London agents, but the responses varied from sincerely-felt indifference to hysterically aggressive.

Three months later, they were still trying, but only quarter-heartedly. One evening, after three rapid refusals in a row, they retired to a pub, where their Slade tribute band, *Flayed*, had played when they were younger. They'd drunk a lot, and Jim became particularly upset about the script's effect on one of the agent's secretaries, who was now having regular sessions with a Harley Street psychotherapist.

And so it was that, after an evening over-indulging in cheap brandy laced with creative despair, the script got left behind on the counter of a chip shop in Battersea.

Two months later, covered in postmarks and obscene abuse in a variety of languages, it arrived at Hollywood's leading abattoir, Cows R Us. A young, part-time employee, who was doubling up as a trainee editor at a major studio, found the script discarded in one of the slaughterhouse's drainage channels. After washing it under the tap and drying it with a hair dryer, he'd taken it home to read.

He laughed until he cried, and firmly believed he was looking at the greatest example of off-beat satire since *Catch 22*. He rushed off to the studio the next day, hassled the daylights out of his boss, and, by the end of the week, it was up for executive consideration.

Despite the bad spelling, and a few remaining bovine bloodstains, the board agreed the script was exceptional. Two days later, Jim got the call. He was smart enough not to mention that the script was supposed to be deadly serious. The deal was unbelievable. A month later, production started. First week box office returns hit fifty million dollars, and it had ballooned, worldwide, from there.

James Redfern Chartwell had arrived. A 20-acre mansion in Beverley Park, a 35-metre 116 Sunseeker superyacht moored in Barbados, a private jet, three additional homes - Sardinia, Monte Carlo, Malibu and, of course, the two-story apartment overlooking Central Park.

Jim walked past the orchestra who were busy playing the *Vampire Midwives* theme (now an iTunes phenomenon) and on up the red-carpeted steps to the left of the stage. As he appeared in full view, the cheering became ecstatic, the volume unbelievable. Halle threw her arms out wide and bounced up and down with excitement. Her diamond-encrusted evening gown flashed and dazzled in the spotlights. The TV company stopped receiving complaints.

Jim squinted into the audience for any sign of his life-long best friend, Mick. But he was hidden by the adulation.

He walked towards Halle. She looked fabulous. She placed her hands on his shoulders, leaned forward and kissed his cheek.

Although Jim was excited, truly, beyond his wildest dreams, he couldn't help noticing that for a gorgeous, international movie star, she smelt rather strongly of pilchards.

2

The lights continued to shine in Jim's eyes. Then he heard a voice. It was not Halle.

'Thank God! It's alive!'

'What?' muttered Jim.

The smell of pilchards was even stronger now, but the red and gold Dolby Theatre, the cheering audience, the TV cameras and Halle Berry had all gone.

The light he was staring at came from the torch of a London policeman.

'What do you mean "alive"?''

'Well,' said the policeman, patiently, 'if we find a body in a skip, it usually hasn't been breathing for a long time.'

Jim sat up slowly, made himself comfortable on an assortment of bin bags and greasy kitchen waste, and removed the half-opened can of pilchards that had been sliming its way down between his neck and the collar of his shirt.

The policeman thought about offering a helping hand.

Once Jim was out, he clung to the side of the skip, breathing in the cold night air. He realised he had to get into the real world as quickly as possible. So he pulled his shirt out of his trousers and let the pilchards slide down his chest and on to the floor of the alleyway.

'So what happened?' said the policeman.

'No idea,' said Jim, truthfully.

'Spend a lot of nights in skips, do you?'

'I must have had a bit too much to drink and, like, thought the skip was my office hammock.'

'Look, I'm trying to be as nice as I can. Don't take the piss.'

Just then, a ghastly apparition climbed gingerly out of the skip on the other side of the alleyway.

It spoke with a surprising degree of confidence.

'Greetings, officer, and can I say how delighted I am to make your acquaintance on such a splendid evening. All those stars up there with all that sort of black stuff. Dare I reference *2001: A Space Odyssey*? I think I dare. As night times go, it must be one of the most glorious on record.'

'What the bleedin' hell's he on about?' said the policeman.

Encouraged by this positive response, the apparition continued.

'Tonight, gentlemen, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other leads to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly.'

And with that, the ghost fell forward and landed face down in an oily puddle.

The policeman rushed across the alley, knelt down and turned Mick over.

The puddle had removed a good proportion of the cement dust that had created his sepulchral image, and replaced it with a thin layer of well-used Castrol 10W-30.

'I know him,' said Jim, 'but he didn't used to keep changing colour.'

'Who *is* he?'

'My best friend, Michael. He was at the Oscars with me, a few minutes ago.'

The policeman thought of truncheoning them both and stuffing them back in the skips, but professionalism got the better of reason, and he concentrated on making a speedy return to the bosom of his family and a nice cup of cocoa by the fire.

Mick was helped to his feet. He looked very confused.

'Hello James', he said, staring at no one in particular, 'I didn't know you'd joined the police force.'

'Can you remember where you live?' said the policeman.

Mick and Jim went into a huddle. After 20 seconds, Jim turned round.

'Yes.'

The policeman looked at them hard and long, before turning and walking away. Was he going to abandon these two citizens? Was he going to leave them alone to the dangers of the night? Not quite. After a few yards, he turned his head. His lips formed into a grim smile, and against his better judgement said, 'Mind how you go.'

Mick and Jim were wobbling, but they clung together. Two dishevelled, pathetic silhouettes, smelling of rotten fish and sump oil, backlit by the spluttering of the alley's only sodium streetlight.

'Y'know,' said Jim, slowly, 'this is just like in *Whatsit III*, released 19 somethin' or other, directed by Doo-dah, produced by Thingy Studios.'

'Starring?'

'Fuck knows.'

Mick breathed in deeply and considered the information. He belched into the ether, then spoke.

'As ever, James, you're *absolutely* right.'

At that moment, a large wolf came by. It urinated up Mick's leg, then padded off down the alley.

Jim had lied to the policeman. Neither of them could remember where they lived, so, as they'd nothing better to do with the rest of the evening, they decided to follow it.

3

Unlike Mick and Jim, the wolf knew where it lived. Within a couple of hours, it was howling outside Norwood's infamous *It's Alright He Won't Bite Urban Wolf Sanctuary*.

The lights came on, and a couple of minutes later, the door opened an inch or two and a shotgun appeared through the gap.

'Stand back,' hissed a voice, 'Twinkle's a killer.'

This came as surprise to Mick, who had quite taken to the wolf, and was on his hands and knees, waving his oil-soaked tie around for the animal to catch and playfully savage.

Jim wasn't so sure how appropriate the game was, as the tie was still attached to Mick's neck. But even *he* thought the gun was a bit unnecessary.

'You're not going to shoot it?'

'Tranquilliser dart.'

'No need,' grunted Mick, leaning heavily on the wolf to help himself back to his feet. 'Show me where he's got to go, and I'll take him.'

The door opened reluctantly, and revealed an unshaven older man sporting a grey comb-over and faded World Wildlife Fund-branded pyjamas.

'OK, but watch yourself, he can turn nasty.'

As if to prove a point, Twinkle snarled viciously at the man and feigned a lunge. The man raised his gun, but Mick fell on his knees and whispered in the wolf's ear. The wolf un-bared it's impressive set of fangs and licked a bit of Castrol 10W-30 off the back of Mick's hand.

Once Twinkle was back in his reinforced cage, and happily tucking into something dead, the man stacked the gun in a corner and switched on a kettle.

'Tea?'

They were soon sat round a rough, pine table drinking warm liquid. The man was stirring his mug with a glass insemination pipette. It turned out his name was Percy Spearmint. He started explaining about the Urban Wolf Sanctuary, and how he loved running it and how it had become his life, but quickly broke off to enquire about the way they smelled.

Mick's memory, or at least his ability to lie through his teeth, was slowly returning. He explained that they'd been making an industrial video about pilchard canning when one of the machines had sprung a major oil leak.

'At three in the morning?'

'We're in demand.'

Percy sniffed the air.

'Pilchards in brandy - that's unusual.'

Mick covered his mouth.

'New product line. Very popular in Norway. Be in the shops soon.'

Jim had a vague sensation the conversation was shunting sideways up a cul-de-sac which finished in a disused landfill site, so he opened a new front.

‘How many wolves you got here?’

‘Only Twinkle. We had more, but, over the years, they’ve all escaped. I can be a bit careless - I drinks strong cocoa.

‘Strong?’

Yeah, half and half with brandy. It’ll be interesting when them pilchards come out, might have a dabble.’

‘What cocoa and pilchards?’ said Jim.

‘Tell me more about the other wolves,’ said Mick, elbowing Jim up the sandy pathway that led to Beachy Head.

‘In the old days,’ said Percy, ‘I’d have me ten o’clock cocoa, then do the rounds. Goodnight Stalin. Goodnight Barack. Goodnight Cherie. All that sort of soppy stuff. But I was so bladdered, I’d sometimes leave a cage open and they’d be gone. Next thing you know there’s sightings of the Pimlico Panther or the Walton-on-Thames Wildcat. A year ago, Berlusconi got out and broke into Crufts on Best Dog of Show night. Randy bastard! There were video clips on that YouTube, ‘til they took ‘em down - plus, next year, lots of weird cross-breeds turned up.’

‘I think I remember it,’ lied Mick.

Jim had tired of the blurred views of the landfill site and Beachy Head, and felt the need to lighten up the conversation.

‘So, Twinkle’s a killer?’

‘Yeah,’ said Percy. ‘Two keepers, last year. Managed to keep it under wraps. Nowadays, I only hire people with no fixed abode, no next of kin and no brains. Before Twinkle’s keeper cull, we used to make a bomb on our *Discover Our Wild Animal Eco-Friends Junior School Programme*. But now we’ve had to dump it.’

‘Why?’

Percy sniffed the air again.

‘Let me guess. He peed up your leg?’

‘Only a bit,’ said Mick, who was getting quite protective of Twinkle.

‘Well,’ said, Percy, returning to the story, ‘we had a school party in, and they was up against his cage effin’ and blindin’ at him. So he peed on ‘em. He got a terrific range when he goes for it. We had to give back all the entrance money, plus it cost us a fortune in dry cleaning bills and mouthwash.’

Mick and Jim nodded sympathetically, as they always enjoyed doing when they heard a pile of gobby kids got pissed on.

‘See, this place was set up by a bloke, Viceroy Smith - one of them top eco-journalists at the *Manchester Gleaner*. He wants to release animals like wolves and bears back into the wild, mainly up North. Right up fuckin’ North, if you want my opinion. The sanctuary is, just for, like, what d’you call it - public relations? London luvvies, MPs, greeny charities, newspapers and the telly. The paper pays for it, but I worry how long that’ll keep going, particularly if Twinkle keeps pissing on punters and killing staff.’

After the incidents with the keepers, the *Gleaner* had run a series of articles about how brilliant the sanctuary was, and managed to keep Twinkle's urban blood lust away from the rest of the media.

The more Percy talked, the more Mick and Jim, despite their tenuous links with reality, realised he must be completely loose cannon, who was strangely in love with this dump.

Apparently, to increase security, he'd electrified Twinkle's cage by connecting it to a nearby sub-station. His handiwork resulted in a massive explosion that generated an 80 per cent power outage, 75 per cent increase in crime and 60 per cent increase in road accidents throughout Norwood and District.

The *Gleaner* was quick to blame this 'undocumented energy misalignment' on the fact that Percy's application to install an 80-metre-high wind turbine at the sanctuary was turned down.

In the editorial, the claim that the rotor blades would miss the dining room windows of local council flats by six feet was dismissed as a lie being spread by international oil companies.

Following an engineering survey, commissioned and conducted by the *Gleaner*, they were able to prove that the distance was, in fact, more like eight feet.

Loose cannon or not, acting on automatic pilot, Mick put his hand in his top pocket and pulled out an Implosion Productions business card.

'Here you are, Percival. If you ever need a video, give us a call.'

It was Jim who realised that the card must contain vital information about where they lived. He grabbed it and wrote down the address. After thanking Percy for the warm liquid, they set off for their office with marginally clearer heads and a completely illegible scrap of paper.

Back in his cage, Twinkle settled down to sleep, and wondered why he hadn't attacked the two strange-smelling people. He concluded that there was something different about them. He sensed an independent spirit, which appealed to his animal instincts. He sensed they were opportunists. He sensed they'd little in the way of a moral compass or even a moral sat-nav. He guessed they were probably at odds with normal society. They were alone in the world. All a bit like himself.

The fat, oily one with smelly breath and the rag round his neck was the first human being he'd ever taken a shine to. But facts are facts, and he was a wolf, with a serious reputation to maintain. He'd have to have a think. Next time, the fat, oily one might not be so lucky.

4

Lew Roller put his feet on the desk and looked across the office with a considerable amount of delight. Last week, he'd bought the *Soho Post Intelligencer* - *all the gossip that's not fit to print*, and it was perfect.

On his knee was a large brown canvas binder containing several years' worth of back issues. The *Post Intelligencer* covered Soho - one of the most historic, most cosmopolitan, most lively, and, some would say, sleaziest and most criminally active areas of London.

Despite so much happening on its patch, the *Post Intelligencer* seemed to perpetually miss the journalistic boat. On the day the nearby Griffin Hotel collapsed into the street and made headlines across the UK and a large part of Europe, the *Post Intelligencer's* banner headline was *WORM FOUND IN BAG OF FROZEN PEAS*.

When Soho experienced an earthquake (4.2 on the Richter scale) the *Post Intelligencer* went for *GREEK STREET MEGA-SQUIRREL TERRIFIES GRAPHIC DESIGNER*.

Its main source of news seemed to be the world-famous Groucho Club, in nearby Dean Street. Leading TV and media personalities were regularly photographed entering or leaving the club. Most captions were complete froth - 'Tristram de Ville, artistic director of hit reality TV show *How fast could you top your granny?* flaunts his daring reinterpretation of the cravat.'

But, occasionally, there was more sensational stuff, as in *BBC SENIOR MANAGEMENT IN 18-IN-A-BED, EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL ORGY*. The *Post Intelligencer* was never taken to court, as everyone knew its dwindling readership was made up of people who only buy newspapers to colour in the pictures. Not that the *Post Intelligencer's* photographs ever contained anything to set hormones vibrating. The BBC alien orgy story, for instance, was supported by a pleasant photograph of two Sky Television executives popping into the club to attend a charity lunch.

The advertisements were just as bad. Lew's eye fell on one bizarre example, which seemed to sum up the publication's sorry state. It ran:

NO CASE TOO TRIVIAL NO COMPLAINT TOO PUERILE

*Is your compensation claim getting on your tits,
and no bugger wants to know?*

Do you have an insignificant but apparently intractable problem with your compensation claim, and those legal wankers laugh in your face?

Well now, you can contact a devious, conniving (legally-trained) bastard who makes Machiavelli look like a recently canonised nun.

Underhand tactics, barely legal manoeuvres, fake documentation, bogus claims and counterclaims, intimidation, blackmail, jury nobbling and any other shit-laden technique that will get you the compensation you do, or do not (I couldn't care less) deserve.

Email me now at digby@youandwhosefuckinarmy.co.uk

(You know it makes sense!)

The *Post Intelligencer's* dismal contribution to British journalism and the UK advertising industry didn't bother Lew. The really spectacular thing about the *Post Intelligencer* office -

the absolute winner - was that the office came complete with a range of truly unspeakable smells.

As he swivelled in the chair and breathed in deeply, his nostrils flared in a reflex action. He felt he could detect stale marijuana, sweaty sub-editors' armpits and circulation managers' poorly disinfected groins. The cracks in his desk top seemed to have been packed with rancid gorgonzola, and the computer screen was covered with blobs of what looked like yoghurt covered in grey-green mould.

Overall, he had the distinct impression that the office had been home to a big dog with some sort of overactive gland, or maybe it was the leaking sewage pipe near the back window, or the suspiciously unidentifiable stench seeping up from the massage parlour on the ground floor.

With its circulation of around 2,500 swirling rapidly down the plughole, a non-existent editorial staff and one 14-year old advertising sales executive, who turned up when he could bunk off school, the *Soho Post Intelligencer* had cost peanuts, yet it was going to make him millions.

Its fetid ambience would guarantee the privacy he was going to need. Some of the scumbags who might want to gain access to this office with a view to interfering with, or actually blocking, his plans would need guts of steel to spend more than 30 seconds in the place.

He leaned back in the swivel chair and inhaled the gorgeously protective atmosphere. It was at this point that his self-congratulatory euphoria was rapidly overtaken by his natural reflexes. He lurched upright, gave a passingly good impression of a death rattle, grabbed a metal waste bin, and emptied a partially digested full-English breakfast into its depths.

He bent over, gasping for breath, then, when his vision returned, wiped his mouth and perspiring brow with his handkerchief. He raised his breakfast-smearred head slowly, but there was still no doubt in his mind. This room contained the most deliciously repugnant olfactory cocktail ever to have graced his nostrils.

But as he'd just proved so dramatically, you could have too much of a good thing.

5

May Piow Wong beamed her one million watt smile into the alcove. But she instinctively knew something was wrong.

Mick and Jim must have made well over a thousand visits to the Lanzarote Lizard Lounge, or 3Ls, the dingy, architecturally challenged, VAT-undocumented drinking hideaway, just 100 yards from Implosion Production's office in Soho's Greek Street.

During the course of those well-over-a-thousand visits, Mick and Jim's response to that fantastic smile had always been instant and cheerful - even joyous.

Today was different. To say there was no reaction would've been a wild exaggeration. May changed tack, running her hands down her black pencil skirt. It was the sort of move, aided by her crisp white shirt and slender form that was guaranteed to get her attention from anyone, for as long as she wanted.

But not this time. She looked closer. And suddenly she realised. It was a shock. The eyes! Normal people had corneas, irises and pupils. But Mick and Jim's eyes looked like the grey, glutinous surface of a Hammer Horror swamp, with just the occasional arrival of a lethargic methane bubble to indicate signs of life.

She looked across at Albert the barman. He nodded. May swivelled round on her heels and returned the two half-pint mugs of sherry back to the bar. This was weird. They *always* started their sessions with a half-pint of their favourite sherry, delivered direct from a chemical plant near May's home town in North East China.

'Shall I call ambulance?'

Albert gave a low, doubtful whistle.

'Not yet,' he said scratching his stubble. 'Maybe best we wait and see if they start having spasms, hallucinations or speaking in tongues, or somethin'. But tell you what, I seen 'em bad, but never anythin' like this.'

While the rest of the 3L's lunchtime clientele bustled merrily through their hour of freedom, Mick and Jim's alcove began to generate a disturbing feeling of post-apocalyptic despair. An isolated bioclimate - permeated with hopelessness, despondency, gloom and feeling of impending something or other.

It wasn't surprising. The eight-mile walk back from the Wolf Sanctuary had taken ten tortuous hours. Taxis went by, but they always seemed to have disappeared by the time Mick and Jim realised they were there. They tried to keep their spirits up by pretending their office was just round the next corner, even when there wasn't a next corner in sight.

Occasionally, they came across someone huddled in a doorway, who, after being woken up and presented with Jim's garbled requests and incomprehensible, crumpled directions, had, quite reasonably, told them to fuck off.

The journey had taken an impressive toll. Their brief lucidity at the Wolf Sanctuary had evaporated and been replaced by a state that would make a corpse look pretty nimble. The Oscars, the skips, the policeman, the pilchards, Percy Spearmint, Twinkle the Wolf and whatever they'd done to get themselves into this perilous condition had merged into an endless stream of nothingness. Life was now officially a blank.

'I know,' said May, 'I'll make them a couple of cocktails with cherries, umbrellas and maybe a sparkler.'

Albert put the hand of experience on her arm.

‘Nice idea, but I reckon it could be fatal. Best give ‘em a few more hours. Do you know if they’re in BUPA?’

Four hours later, the first signs of life appeared. Jim slumped forward and smashed his face into the table top. Within seconds, Mick did the same. It wasn’t much, but it was two moves in the right direction.

May and Albert covered them with a tartan travel rug, stuffed tissues up Jim’s bleeding nose, and busied themselves getting the 3Ls ready for the evening.

At seven o’clock, they heard the first moan from the alcove. But it was false dawn - a short-lived moment of elation. At nine o’clock, there was a failed attempt to provide them with coffee. But by closing time, May and Albert were relieved to hear the first words.

Mick said, ‘This isn’t the office.’

And Jim said, ‘Eh?’

Albert told May she could head off home, and that he’d sort them out.

May collected her things, and stood in the doorway. She looked really upset.

‘Mr Mick and Mr Jim very nice people, in past, when they were alive.’

Albert put a comforting arm around her shoulder, then watched as her silhouette walked away down the alley’s wet cobbles.

He returned to the alcove, where the conversation seemed to have stopped. After pulling some foam cushions off a couple of benches, Albert laid them on the floor next to the alcove. Then using the force of gravity, rather than muscle power, he dumped Mick and Jim’s bodies onto the cushions and covered them with the tartan blanket.

He’d just got their arms and legs more or less lined up, and checked that their air passages were clear, when there was a tiny knock at the door.

It was May Piow Wong.

‘I been thinking in street,’ she said, quietly. ‘I stay with them ‘til morning.’

6

When morning came, or at least when mid-morning came, May was by their side to tell them where they were, who they were and what they did for a living. She made them a light breakfast of tap water with a generous helping of Alka-Seltzer, then sat with them as they made the long journey up towards the light.

Around noon, when they were able to stand, she showed them how to move around with the help of the furniture. Later, after they'd rested, she bravely directed their tentative steps down Greek Street, helped them, one-at-a-time, up the wheelchair ramp to their office building's main doors, worked the lift and eventually inserted the key into the lock on their office door. She wisely suggested they avoid the hammocks and grab a little more sleep on the office sofa and armchairs. At five o'clock, she came back and made sure they shaved, showered and got themselves dressed. They didn't say anything, but the grunts seemed quite grateful.

*

That evening, Mick and Jim sat down in their alcove and, using as few words and as few sudden movements as possible, considered their immediate past.

'All I can remember is Halle Berry, a ghost and taxis that wouldn't stop,' said Jim.

'All I can remember is that you were dressed as a policeman, and something pissed in my shoe,' said Mick.

'Doesn't sound like a sophisticated night out.'

'Was it night?'

'Think so.'

'Yeah.'

'Right.'

'Sure'

'Oh.'

The conversation was saved from descending any further by the arrival of May with two coffees, a bottle of water, two glasses, and a side order of pre-crumbled Alka-Seltzer.

'Mr Jim, Mr Mick - you take it easy, eh?'

They did. Neither of them spoke again for another two hours.

However, they managed to sip a few mouthfuls of coffee and finish off the side order.

Eventually, Mick uttered the first real sentence.

'We can't go through that again.'

'No,' said Jim.

'We're getting too old.'

'Yeah.'

'Gotta make some lifestyle changes.'

'Absolutely'

‘Do something different.’

‘Agree.’

‘Something that gives our lives meaning.’

‘Right.’

It was at that moment, an old light bulb at the back of Mick’s brain was suddenly switched on. The conversation immediately became much more engaged.

‘Look fuck features, if all you’re going to do is agree with me, I might as well go and talk to that picture of Lord fuckin’ Lucan over there.’

‘Is he here?’ said Jim, sitting upright and looking alarmed. ‘I thought he did a runner.’

They were on the mend.

7

At that same moment, surrounded by forty million pounds of Georgian splendour, Viscount Celtic, was definitely *not* on the mend. He sat back in his leather armchair and sighed as he turned the pages of the report.

Across the room, 20 luxurious yards away, his wife, Pernilla, put down her *petit point*.

‘You’re awfully quiet, Boshier, what are you reading?’

‘Morbidity and Mortality Weekly,’ he replied, ‘trying to cheer myself up.’

She walked over the Afghan carpet to the large Georgian windows that looked out over Belgravia’s exclusive Eaton Square.

Pernilla was not about to see Boshier, otherwise known as the Rt. Hon. Hamish Culloden Bannockburn Flodden, Thirteenth Viscount Celtic, move into self-pity mode. It was time to surgically implant some backbone.

The Viscount had every reason to be terminally depressed. Earlier that day, he’d received a detailed letter from his accountant letting him know how precisely the game was up. The game had been going badly for the last 200 years. Now it was well into the last 30 seconds of the sixth chukka, and the supporters had already packed up the cucumber sandwiches and champagne - in padlocked, steel hampers.

‘I mean,’ said Boshier, ‘what sort of chap writes out of the blue to say you’re suddenly penurious - pauperised - impecunious?’

‘I think the word you’re looking for,’ she said coldly, ‘is bankrupt.’

‘Be that as it may, my sweet, it’s all a bit adjacent if you ask me. I mean the blighter was at Balliol.’

Pernilla’s ample bosom heaved in despair. She’d suspected for some time, that their beautiful, five-story, seven-bedroom lifestyle was in danger. The house was mortgaged to the hilt, the jewellery was gone, and there were no more sources of family cash or investments onshore, offshore or buried in the garden under the organic asparagus patch.

The overdraft at one of London’s most exclusive private banks was horrendous, and peer of the realm or no peer of the realm, the manager and his team were losing patience. The investors who, at times of crises over the years, had been sold shares in the building, were not receiving dividends, and were demanding a sale.

Despite his protestations and blathering, Boshier knew that, this time, the deal was real. Two centuries of sustained, supercharged profligacy on the part of his ancestors, not to mention that portion of their shared DNA that made light of reckless gambling and risk taking, meant that, once the sale was made, he and his wife could look forward to a future full of sod all.

Of course, there was his daily attendance money from the House of Lords, but how far could you get on three hundred pounds a day, or whatever it was.

He turned to Pernilla and laid out the whole sorry tale - confession after confession. He included his losses at casinos, such as the Clermont Club and the Grosvenor G, and his spectacular betting disasters at up-market turf accountants, Fitzdares. He’d also lost lots of money betting large sums at frightening odds with other members of the

aristocracy about, which Member of the House of Lords would die next, how much a division would be won by, or which of two pigeons sat on the wall of the Thames-side terrace would empty its bowels first.

When he'd finished, Pernilla realised that if there was going to be backbone surgery, *she* had to be first to the operating table. She spun round with her surgeon's eyes blazing.

'Fuck, you Boshier, you fucking idiot, why the fuck didn't you tell me we were up shit creek when you first lost the fucking paddle?'

Pernilla had been educated at Roedean, the UK's most prestigious girls' school, and had, naturally, picked up some of the linguistic mores of that establishment.

'Have you tried everyone?'

'Yes.' said Boshier, weakly.

'What about Uncle Willie?'

'He's doing ten years for embezzlement - brought down Frobishers, if you remember.'

'Yes,' said Pernilla, 'I met him just before the trial, at a wine tasting at Annabel's. He got a bit woozy and started groping me. Well, you know the old Roedean girls' motto *D-Cups mean Data*. I found out, after thirty of the most excruciating minutes of my life, that he "can get me anything I want".'

'Turns out he was doing dodgy export deals in the US, selling some sort of imitation gin. To get an import license, he had to be vetted by some organised crime syndicate in New York. He told me all about it. It was a bit difficult to hear as he had his revolting face shoved into my cleavage at the time, but I persevered, for the sake of the family, y'know.'

'Apparently, there was a large smart office in Manhattan, all immaculate décor and sharp suits. Said it was all very polite and charming. Except that, as Uncle Willie was leaving, the chappie in charge said to give his regards to Willie's wife, you remember Felicity, and how were Jamie and Cassandra getting on at Hornbury, and that it was never easy starting a new school, especially when lessons started as early as 8.30.'

'We know where you live?'

'Precisely. But, if we have to act fast and, you know, be economical with the laws of the land, Uncle Willie has contacts.'

'But he's locked up.'

'No he isn't. They let him out of Parkhurst last week - good behaviour - must be a first! Anyway, he phoned me to see if I fancied reliving our Annabel's experience. Randy old sod! I put him on hold, but I've got his number. You could ring him.'

'But, Christ, *organised crime!*' said Viscount Celtic. 'And I'm a member of the House of Lords.'

'Look Boshier, all your £300 a day will buy us is a thicker gauge of cardboard box. I am *not* ready for the arches under Waterloo Station. Here's the phone, I've selected his number. All you have to do is press 'send.'

To the Rt. Hon. Hamish Culloden Bannockburn Flodden, Thirteenth Viscount Celtic, it sounded as though there might well be a lot more to it than just pressing the 'send' button.

But as Pernilla leaned over and threatened him with her enormous breasts, it occurred that *D-Cups mean Disaster*, might have been more appropriate school motto. But, he pressed the button, all the same.

8

During the final hour before 3L's chucking-out time, over more coffee and water, Mick and Jim discussed their abject failure as human beings.

This was despite the fact that they'd become rich. There was the *Daring Dooz* escapades with their svelte, 60-year-old, dangerous sports and unarmed combat expert, come cleaning lady, Mrs Hathaway. Plus, a major contribution from mad, oil-rich, multi-billionaire film financier, Rory MacHeinkel III - known throughout the Hollywood producer underclass as Mac3. Unbelievably, he'd paid them tens of thousands of dollars for simply for making sure his up-and-coming starlet, the lovely Joyce Appleyard, stayed happy.

Without doubt, the world was now their mollusc of choice.

And what were they doing with this freedom?

Answer? Nothing.

Well, that wasn't absolutely true. A couple of days or nights ago they'd done something. Something that had punished them physically and mentally more than they'd ever been punished, before.

Previously, they'd only viewed the abyss through one of those sea-side telescopes that swallow your ten-pence pieces - and that was something they could handle. But in the last few days, they'd stared, wide-eyed with terror, directly into the blackness. They'd smelled the acrid fumes and heard the wailing of lost souls, while gripping its crumbling edge with their fingernails.

'We could use that three-wheel plot developer thing,' said Jim, 'the one you made like Erle Stanley Gardner's. You know, when we were trying to decide what to do with our lives, last year.'

'That suggested we open a bicycle repair shop on the North face of Everest.'

'Oh yeah.'

They sat in silence.

It was all about inertia. Despite their wealth, they couldn't even be bothered to buy new premises. Although, to be fair, their shabby offices, perilously-hung hammocks and dubious tea-making facilities offered a certain womb-like assurance.

May came over.

'Nice to see you both not dead. I hear what happen. You very bad boys. You could get criminal record.'

'No criminals nowadays, only justice-involved individuals.'

'Don't be so sure, clever dickers.'

'Sorry,' said Mick, 'as ever, you're absolutely right. There's no excuse for the dreadful state we got ourselves into. And, on that topic, I'd like to say how much we appreciate the time and effort you put in to looking after us.'

'Was nothing. You good customers. Plus I have shares in chemical plant that make your sherry.'

She winked, smiled and went back to the bar.

May's cheerful disposition and the massive help she'd given them during their darkest 48 hours eased them into a more positive frame of mind.

'You know,' said Mick, 'I'm sure any professional psychoanalyst...'

'As opposed to amateur?'

'Fuck off.'

'Carry on.'

'...looking at our behaviour over the last decade would deduce we've been a couple of self-obsessed shitheads. Just think about it. What have we ever done to *really* help anybody out? It's always been us, us, us.'

'Seemed reasonable at the time.'

Mick ignored the excuse, even though he knew it was true.

'What've we ever given back to society? Eh? Nothing.'

'That's because we never had anything,' said Jim.

'Granted. But now, with Mac3's cash in the bank, maybe it's time to see if we can make some sort of contribution?'

'OK. Any ideas?'

'No.'

They sat in silence for another ten minutes.

Jim spoke first. 'Let's go and buy May a present. After all, she played a blinder.'

'Good idea. Not a life-changer - but maybe it's a start.'

They got up, waved goodbye and headed out into the diesel-infused, fresh air of Greek Street.

At the end of the alleyway, a man was having a conversation with a policeman. The man was slumped down with his back against the 3L's yellow-stained wall. He had a bright-red, heavily lined face, matted hair, a grubby overcoat and grey trousers, covered in dark, oily patches. His bright-red toes poked out through his boots. He was clutching a plastic bottle containing a clear, purple liquid.

Mick stopped in his tracks. In a flash, it all came back. Alleyway, policeman, drunk, inability to stand up, the stench of wolf pee. His first feeling was shame, closely followed by guilt and humiliation. Before he knew it, he was speaking.

'Can we help, officer?'

'No thanks,' said the policeman. 'Big Trev's a regular. I've phoned the station. We'll get him down the cells 'til he dries out.'

The policeman turned to Big Trev and raised his voice, in the way a lot of British people do when they're trying to make Spanish waiters understand the order.

'Drunk - in - public - again - Trev?'

'No, I was drunk in a pub, but the bastards threw me out. That's the only reason I'm drunk in public. See, Major Tom, sorry Constable Thomas, like those posters down the shelter say "Drink Responsibly" well, I was trying to drink responsibly, but I was

creatively expanding the envelope to “Get Drunk Responsibly”. I mean, where is the most responsible place where you can get drunk? Not *you* get drunk, Major Tom, I mean where *one* can get drunk? Answer? A pub. And, having been thrown out, I was making my way to this one, when I noticed an interesting fungus growing between the cobblestones, and was just having a look when you came along. Can you hear me Major Tom. Can you hear me...’

By the time Big Trev started singing, Mick and Jim were heading down Greek Street.

‘Do you think he recognised us,’ said Mick.

‘Who, Big Trev?’

‘No, the copper! The one who interrupted our sleep patterns, with the big torch, the other night.’

‘Blimey! It *was* him!’

Just then, they crossed the road, and noticed an alley on the right. It had two vaguely familiar skips parked in it.

‘Shit me,’ said Jim, ‘we were only fifty yards short of the front door.’

Mick dropped the topic. It just didn’t bear thinking about.

*

Back in the office, Mick and Jim’s new microwave played a tinkling electronic tune to show that it had reheated their coffees.

Jim was not impressed.

‘Why does it have to play a bleeding tune? The other one just went ping.’

‘Techies with too much time on their hands,’ said Mick, ‘although it *does* make a certain cultural input into our hum-drum lives.’

‘Cultural?’

‘Don’t you recognise the tune? It’s *The Trout* by Franz Schubert, 1797 to 1828.’

‘I thought it was *Who stuck the dick on the snowman?*’

‘No,’ said Mick, ‘it’s definitely Schubert. And by the way, remind me to cancel those two tickets I bought for the Artemis Quartet at the Albert Hall.’

They sat down in their armchairs and nursed their coffees.

After five minutes, Mick spoke. Slowly.

‘I think, dear boy, I *might* have the answer.’

‘What?’

‘Big Trev.’

‘Big Trev?’

‘Who else? Let me ask you a few questions. They only apply to the people in this room.’

‘OK.’

‘Who knows about being unspeakably pissed?’

‘We do.’

'Who knows about having no idea where they've been after a night on the Bolivian Chablis?'

'We do.'

'Who knows what it's like waking up in a skip?'

'We do.'

'Who knows 150 ways to cure a hangover, none of which work?'

'We do.'

'Congratulations, Messrs Barton and Chartwell, I can now confirm that you're uniquely qualified to offer comfort, succour and boundless advice to London's growing community of al fresco piss-heads.'

Jim sipped his coffee.

'Any chance of an explanation?'

'Charity,' said Mick. 'Charity work. We could help with the down and outs. The poor alkies, huddling round fires under motorway bridges, drinking meths.'

'Bloody hell,' said Jim, 'can you imagine drinking meths?'

'No, but each to his own.'

Mick sat back in his chair and gazed at the polystyrene tiles on the ceiling.

Jim winced slightly as he thought he was in for a 'They Win. You Lose' eulogy - Mick's lifelong philosophy that each day you should expect life to be crap, so you stayed cool when bad things happened - or something like that. Jim rarely listened.

But now it was Mick, man-of-the-world time.

'Meths might be bad, but do you know in the Mekong delta they drink eel wine. And in South America they're big on Chicha, mixed up chewed corn and human saliva - then you got cobra wine and baby mouse wine. They just stuff whatever it is in a bottle, let it ferment for 12 months, drink and enjoy.'

Jim was not going to be outdone.

'I'd give any of them a go, they'd be heaven compared to meths - 90 per cent ethanol, 10 per cent methanol, plus isopropyl alcohol, acetone, methyl ethyl ketone, methyl isobutyl ketone and denatonium.'

'You learned all that at film school.'

'Dead right. Remember? No meths, just breath on the lens.'

Mick *did* remember, but countered with, 'Show me a Zeiss Compact Prime CP.2 that could withstand your breath after a night on the mutton vindaloo.'

Polly, the office parrot, realised the conversation was becoming skewed and took the opportunity to add in some of the more of the dubious material he'd learned from football fans in a bar in his home town of Playa Blanca in Lanzarote.

*'Mary had a little lamb
And it was always gruntin'
She tied it to a five-barred gate
And kicked it's little...'*

A well-aimed plastic plate, thrown Frisbee-style, hit the cage and effectively put an end to the soliloquy and the dance.

A cloth cover was placed over the cage, and Mick and Jim got back to serious matters.

'I ask you again, James, have we ever given those meths boys a thought? Have we ever realised that, with our vast experience, we might be able to help in some way?'

'Hang on,' said Jim, 'we've only been reformed 12 hours.'

'All the better. The memories, or rather the lack of memories, are still fresh in the brain cells we have left. Why *not*, is what I say!'

'Dunno,' said Jim.

'That's what I like to hear, enthusiasm *sans* borders. Where's the Yellow Pages, Dick Head?'

*

Mick and Jim parked their Morris Traveller about half a mile away from the location given to them by, Agnes, the nice lady at *Underneath the Arches*, a local charity aimed at providing simple, friendly help for people living and drinking rough.

Mick had a sports bag over his shoulder containing a large thermos of tomato soup and a dozen polystyrene cups.

Naturally, they were worried.

The *Relentless Thrust Business Park*, no doubt, looked very different during the day, when it was an ecosystemic hub of leading-edge, fast-track international techno-start-ups - known locally as Willesden's Silicon Valley. But, tonight, it was a frightening mix of dark shadows, empty roads and floodlights, peppered with the red dots of security cameras.

They saw the brazier, glowing underneath the dual-carriageway flyover and stopped. They looked at each other, breathed deeply, then carried on. This is what they'd decided to do. This is why they were here. They'd had half-an-hour's instruction at *Underneath the Arches*, so they felt they knew what to say.

There were five men sat silent and still around the brazier. They huddled against the wind which whipped unforgivingly around the architect-designed, concrete research blocks. Each man had a plastic bottle containing a clear, purple liquid. Some were drinking the stuff.

Five ravished, brazier-lit faces turned to Mick and Jim as they emerged from the gloom.

It was not, as you can imagine, a pleasant sight, but the meths drinkers didn't seem to mind.

'Hello,' said Mick, in a cheerful but concerned way.

He took out the thermos and the polystyrene cups.

'Would any of you like some hot tomato soup?'

'Fuck off,' they chorused.

Their response echoed around the underpass.

After a slight pause, Mick said, 'Oh, alright then.'

The born-again charity workers turned round and headed back in the direction of the Traveller.

Somebody threw a brick.

9

The super-powered extraction system with its hidden, coded, on-off switch had been installed and was fully operational. Lew Roller could, at last, use the *Soho Post-Intelligencer* HQ, without having to regularly empty his stomach into various pieces of office equipment.

He'd disinfected the top of the desk and scraped off some of the nastier-looking sticky stuff, and was looking at a spreadsheet on the ancient computer screen.

A look of supreme satisfaction flickered around his face. This was *his* database. This was *his* future. Right there on the screen in front of him. It was also on two data sticks in two safety deposit boxes at two banks. One in Hollywood and one right here in London.

As he gazed at the hundreds of carefully gathered email addresses from around the world, his mind wandered back to his youth in San Francisco when an old Zenit 3M SLR he'd found in the attic had infected him with the photography bug.

He took infinite care with every shot, particularly as processing took up a large part of his pocket money. But even in those formative years, the writing was scrawled on the wall. He would always show his mother his latest efforts, which usually generated the question, 'And what's it a picture of, honey?'

One day, he made a special photographic study of the San Francisco Bay Bridge but when the prints came back from the drug store, there was no sign of the bridge. This may have been due to his habit of looking through the viewfinder to frame the shot, then, just before he pressed the shutter, popping his head over the top of the camera to check that whatever he was photographing was really there.

The results of his endeavours were uniformly and consistently dismal. But in his deranged mind, he knew he was destined to become a professional photographer. In his late teens, he presented his portfolio to a number of art colleges and photography schools in the Bay area, and became used to receiving one-line rejection letters, usually within 24 hours.

Then one day, he learned about the paparazzi - one quick shot of somebody famous and news agencies and magazines would pay a fortune. Plus Hollywood was just down the road.

He moved south into a small apartment, bought a motorbike, a load of expensive camera equipment and became a paparazzo.

And that's when the problems started.

It wasn't a problem with his clearly demonstrated lack of photographic ability. It wasn't the fact that his eyesight had rapidly deteriorated to the point where he was wearing glasses with lenses half an inch thick, and had difficulty adjusting the camera settings or even finding the eyepiece. It was the paparazzi, themselves.

He was shunned. An outsider trying to muscle in on the action. This approach lasted for a good three months, until a few of the kinder ones asked to see some of his shots.

It immediately became clear that he was in no way a threat. In fact, they unkindly encouraged Lew to show his pictures around to the other paparazzi. Hanging about waiting for celebrities to show could be boring, and it was great to get some, light, if not hilarious, relief.

Agents hated him too. They knew the results would be unspeakable. The nearest he ever got to something worth speaking about was a dynamic, out-of-focus shot of Tom Cruise's Auntie. Unfortunately, it turned out to be a photograph of Maybelline Craddock, a waitress at a burger bar in Los Angeles International Airport, running to get to work on time.

This resulted in an article in the *National Enquirer*, featuring Lew as the country's worst paparazzo, under the headline *Meet America's #1 Click Head*.

Lew was upset - not for himself, but for the ridicule that had inevitably been heaped on poor Maybelline. So much so that he popped round to the burger bar to apologise.

It was her break time, and they sat down to share a cheeseburger and Coke. After the apologies were accepted, she began to talk about Lew's job. He swiftly moved the conversation on to ask her about *her* job. And that's where he discovered the link.

Maybelline mentioned that the Burger Bar staff were always hearing rumours about famous people trying to sneak through the airport, under the paparazzi radar.

'Sometimes it comes to nothing, but sometimes, it's true and a couple of times we've had stars or senators and stuff, usually with some glamour puss, hiding in the kitchens for hours 'til the heat dies down.'

'Really?' said Lew.

It was just a pleasant, off-hand remark. But, although he didn't know it at the time, it was the first formative step that would lead him to the fetid ambience of the *Soho Post Intelligencer*, and his plans for, if not world domination, at least a multi-million dollar bank balance. As Maybelline might have put it - enjoying a massive helping of revenge - served red hot, covered with crushed Carolina Reapers sauce, with or without a sesame seed bun.

10

Mick and Jim sat in their office eating cheeseburgers and discussing their abject failure as human beings, again.

‘Pathetic.’

‘Embarrassing.’

‘Cowardly?’

‘Possibly.’

‘Wimp-like?’

‘Make that Mega-Wimp-like.’

‘One “fuck off” and we scarpered.’

‘Well, actually, it was five “fuck offs”, ‘cos they all shouted at the same time.’

‘And what was there to be frightened of?’

‘Nothing.’

‘They couldn’t even throw a brick straight.’

‘So what do we do, now?’

They each made their own decisions. Jim made a coffee and Mick fired up the office computer.

For five minutes, there was silence, apart from the sound of cheeseburger dunking, unnecessary slurping and the clacking of podgy fingers on a grimy keyboard.

Suddenly Mick spun round on his chair.

‘Sommelier tastevin!’

‘Sommelier tastevin? What’s that when it’s at home? Sounds like a gnome out of Harry Potter?’

‘You’re right, it was Dobby’s uncle.’

‘Very funny.’

Mick read from the screen, ‘Actually, it’s a shallow, silver cup, faceted and convex, so when you’re in a candle-lit cellar, you can judge the colour and clarity of a wine more easily than by holding up a glass.’

‘Sounds fucking stupid to me.’

‘While I appreciate your analysis, James, I have to move that rancid bundle of backfiring nerve cells you call a brain into other more entertaining areas.’

‘Such as?’

Mick stared closely at the screen.

‘I’ve just discovered a sub-culture.’

‘What?’

‘Meths connoisseurs! It’s all here on the internet. Reviews of Simpson’s Methylated Spirits in handy 500ml plastic bottles with tamper-proof top.’

‘Sounds riveting.’

‘More than that. Wanna hear some?’

‘Please yourself.’

Mick put on his poshest voice.

‘From the initial, astringent burst of hydrocarbons, through the top notes of de-icer, to the deeply satisfying after-tones of blowtorched linoleum and hot tarmacadam, this is a quality drink.’

Jim had to chuckle.

‘More?’

‘OK.’

‘Invigorating warmth on the tongue, similar to licking electricity. Keeps your teeth clean too. And certainly no less enjoyable on the way back up.’

‘And last, but not least: A Gem of a drink. Smooth, yet reassuringly corrosive, once the snakes have gone away.’

‘One more?’

‘OK. We lit our cigars post-imbibe. I was grateful that Brighton General had recently expanded its burns unit, not that any of us could get there as we’d all gone blind. Good value for money and definitely recommended.’

‘Very funny, very funny. But how’s that gonna help Mercy Mission II?’

‘Dunno,’ said Mick, ‘maybe we could improve the presentation. Make it more sophisticated. Like drizzle meths into the soup. Y’know like introduce them to the full tomato taste, as part of a controlled, incremental approach. How the fuck should I know?’

‘We ought to have another go. Someone has to help the poor buggers.’

There was another five-minutes’ silence.

‘Got it!’ said Mick, suddenly, banging the keyboard with his fist. ‘We dress up like tramps, get a couple of bottles of meths. No tomato soup. Just swan on down there and build up a bit of rapport.’

‘Good idea.’

‘Tonight?’

‘You’re on.’

Within minutes, they were in Greek Street, shuffling bravely off to Romany’s hardware store in Brewer Street to purchase the *beverages du nuit*, with an earnest determination to get themselves toggled out at the Oxfam shop, just round the corner.

Next to Oxfam was a sports equipment shop. Understandably but unfortunately, it never occurred to them, for a second, to pop in and buy some shin pads.

11

‘Doesn’t play cricket by any chance does he?’ asked the young doctor on duty at A&E. ‘Bloody good shot - twenty yards in the dark with a half-brick. And he was sitting down, you say. Remarkable. I could see him at cover, junior doc’s eleven, no problem.’

‘Is it broken?’ asked Jim.

‘Oh, your ankle?’ said the doctor vaguely, ‘no, just badly bruised.’

‘Anyway,’ said Mick, defensively, ‘we had four legs between us, there’s only three stumps in a wicket. He could’ve just got lucky.’

‘And he’s permanently out of his head on methylated spirits,’ added Jim.

‘That wouldn’t be a problem,’ said the doctor, ‘we’ve got some biomimetic enzyme nanocomplexes on trial - whack a couple of those down him and he’ll have an IQ Don Bradman would’ve been happy to declare on.’

Jim was confused, particularly as he suspected Don Bradman was probably a mafia boss. He immediately returned to familiar territory.

‘So what do I do about my ankle?’

The doctor was jolted back to reality.

‘Your ankle, of course, of course! It was quite unprofessional of me to ramble on like that when I should be concentrating on a patient who’s suffered a violent attack and is lucky not to have to a severe fracture.’

‘Thank you,’ said Jim, ‘apology accepted.’

‘Not at all. Lots of rest is the answer.’

‘Will do,’ said Jim.

‘My pleasure,’ said the doctor. ‘That’s what we’re here for. Go carefully.’

Mick and Jim went carefully. Just as they reached the door, the doctor had a final word.

‘One last thing, chaps, where exactly *is* this underpass?’

*

There was a gleaming, white Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud convertible, parked on double yellows outside *Underneath the Arches*.

As Mick walked by and Jim hobbled by, they couldn’t help but cast admiring glances in its direction. Mainly because, sat in the passenger seat, was a buxom blond with a low-cut leopard-skin-print dress. She pouted a sympathetic, red-lipped pout as Mick took Jim’s crutches and helped heave him up the five steps to the charity’s main door.

Jim winced with pain as he navigated the steps. Mick also winced with pain as he realised he wouldn’t be the one driving round London with a woman God had designed to seriously upstage a Silver Cloud convertible.

In the reception, a uniformly suntanned man was smoking a large Havana cigar. He was wearing a white linen jacket, pink shirt with a pink and grey spotted bow-tie. Expensive jeans. No socks. Clarke Gable moustache. White Gucci loafers. Louche or what?

He was speaking to Agnes, the nice charity lady.

‘So, Britney and I will be away at the *Overprivileged for the Underprivileged* international charity conference in Monaco, for three weeks. You *did* make the reservation - Hotel de Paris?’

Agnes nodded.

‘Britney?’

‘Latest secretary, got to have someone to take notes!’

‘Are you sure the honeymoon suite is appropriate?’

‘She’s new. It’s all about team building! Team building!’

Agnes looked unimpressed. ‘What if there are any emergencies?’

‘My dear, I’m the CEO of *Underneath the Arches*. My job is to delegate, delegate, delegate. Use your initiative. Just make sure the donations keep coming in.’

The CEO turned round and bumped into Jim.

He turned back and spoke to Agnes, the nice lady, in a way that wasn’t very nice.

‘Look, I’ve told you before - keep them out of the office, it takes ages to get rid of the smell.’

‘These aren’t clients,’ said Agnes, ‘this is Mr Barton and Mr Chartwell, two volunteers.’

The CEO’s face cracked into a rather sickening, ultra-white-toothed smile.

‘Excellent! Excellent! Keep up the good work.’

And with that, he patted Jim on the shoulder, turned and headed back to the Roller.

Mick looked out of the window as Britney thrust her chest towards the approaching CEO, opened her mouth wide and wiggled what looked like a very long tongue.

‘And what can I do for you two gentlemen?’

Jim’s injury and the Britney-long-tongue incident had made the decision for him. Mick put on his best, pleasant, caring face.

Agnes didn’t look too frightened.

‘I’m afraid we’re going to have to resign.’

‘Resign?’

‘Yes, you know, like, retire...’

He paused, turned to Jim, who gave a helpful hobble and grimace, then looked out of the window to catch a glimpse of the Rolls-Royce pulling smoothly away.

It was all he needed to finish the sentence, ‘...hurt.’

*

When Jim limped into the 3Ls, May rushed over to ask what was the matter.

‘I didn’t dodge a half-brick,’ he said, as he struggled to sit down in their alcove.

‘And who threw the brick?’ said May, in disgust.

‘A crypto-cricketer,’ said Mick.

‘Two Perrier waters please, and, as Jim’s injured, give him a slice of lemon to build up his strength.’

They sat down with their bubbly water.

Jim was not only upset and feeling sorry for himself, he was envious.

‘Did you see that *Roller?*’

‘Did you see that *cleavage?*’ said Mick.

‘Three weeks in Monte Carlo - and keep the donations coming in.’

‘Bloody hell - what a con artist.’

‘Pic-fuckin’-asso.’

‘Sunbed period.’

‘Yeah!’

‘Mind you, look on the bright side. The Junior Doctor’s eleven will soon have a new star player.’

Jim was not amused.

‘If you want to look on the bright side, look at my fucking ankle - I bet it glows in the dark.’

Mick was anxious not to trigger one of Jim’s moaning sessions, however justified, so he changed the subject.

‘Do you know that Sydney Harbour Bridge has a span of 504 metres and the top is 440 feet above the average sea level?’

‘No, I fucking don’t, and don’t mix your units. And how is that useless information gonna stop my fucking ankle hurting.’

‘Before Jim’s impressive range of expletives could get into their stride, a man strolled over. He was new to the 3Ls, and new to Mick and Jim.

‘Hi there,’ he said.

He was American.

‘I don’t mean to intrude, but as I was walking past you guys, I heard the name Roller. That’s my name. Lewis Roller.’

He extended his hand. Mick and Jim extended theirs. The American had very thick glasses and it took him a few seconds make the connection.

‘I’ve just moved in around here, and this is my first time in one of your great English pubs, and I was wondering if I could join you.’

Mick explained the Roller was a car, but as his Sydney Harbour Bridge gambit had seriously collapsed into the depths, he was more than happy to pull up a chair for the newcomer. Anything to stop Jim’s ankle-whingeing session.

‘So,’ said Mick, ‘what brings you to the flesh-pots of Soho in the decadent, but internationally-renowned, City of Westminster?’

‘I just bought the *Soho Post-Intelligencer*.’

‘You won’t find anything out from that rag,’ said Mick. ‘It’s useless, I’d rather read the label on my granny’s gripe water bottle. You should try something with a bit more

gravitas; something with a bit more intellectual content, like the *Daily Star* or the *Guardian*.

'No!' said Lew. 'I bought the actual newspaper, as a *business*.'

Mick spluttered his Perrier over the table.

'What!'

'Is there a problem?'

'There is if you paid more than ten quid for it.'

Lew look confused. 'A quid is one of your Great British Pounds, right?'

'Right.'

'Well, no, I paid a lot more than that, but it was still a steal. See I have *plans*.'

Lew explained all about his life as a paparazzo. Well, not quite all. He left out the total lack of success, the humiliation, the ignominy and the vicious, underhand backstabbing he'd received from the profession. Other than that, he was pretty truthful, give or take a few major embellishments.

'So,' said Jim, 'you're a leading paparazzi guy in Hollywood. That's impressive. I bet you've got a few stories to tell.'

Good, thought Mick, the ankle was fading into medical history.

'You'd be *surprised*,' said Lew, with a strange smile.

'But what are you doing *here*?'

'I'm kinda retiring. Had enough of LA. But I'll be staying in the business.'

'How?'

Lew leaned forward. 'It's a bit confidential.' He tapped the side of his nose with his index finger.

This was the poor sod's first time in a British pub, and he'd just thrown a lot of cash down the drain, and from what they could tell he was optically challenged, so Mick and Jim took pity, and leaned forward in what could vaguely be described as indifferent disbelief. And anyway, it was a good step up from getting hit by half-bricks.

That said, had they known where Lew's conversation was going to lead them - life-threatening scenarios, highly organised professional violence and bone-numbing sexual onslaughts - they'd have gone for the half-bricks option, like a shot.

12

At the *It's Alright He Won't Bite Urban Wolf Sanctuary*, Percy Spearmint was trying to calm his nerves after the nightmare of feeding Twinkle. He was making his way to the microwave oven to re-heat his nightly cup of cocoa-brandy mix, when the phone rang.

'Hi,' said a voice. It sounded American.

'Is that the *Urban Wolf Sanctuary* in Norwood County in the United Kingdom of England?'

'Yeah,' said Percy, getting the general gist.

He slipped his mug into the microwave.

'What can I do you for?'

'Sorry?'

'What can I do you for?'

'Sorry, bud, but *no comprendo*. There's a lot of words I recognise, but they're kinda outta whack.'

'How can I help you?'

'Now you're talking American - great! What time is it over there?'

'About ten o'clock at night.'

'Hell, it's only high noon here, that England place must be a long way from LA.'

'How can I help you?'

'You're speaking to one of the world's greatest movie directors, and I'm looking for a wolf.'

'And?'

'I hear you got one.'

'Yes.'

'Is he big and nasty and dangerous?'

'Yes.'

'Great.'

'Sorry about all the questions, but as a top director with a stellar, worldwide reputation to maintain, I have to be sure. Like here's another question. Is Scotland attached to England, or is it stuck onto that Europe place? I'm talking geographical here.'

'It's attached,' said Percy, 'to the top of England.'

The microwave pinged - it was an old model - and he reached for his mug, hoping the cocoa mix would ease his confusion.

'So there's no animal importation restrictions, viz-a-viz the England-Scotland interface?'

'No.'

'Great.'

The brandy in the cocoa began to course through Percy's veins and gave him the confidence to get some clarification.

'Look, I don't normally get calls like this, what's going on?'

'Hey, buddy, calm down. Nothing's going on. This is a reputable call.'

'Who exactly are you?'

The name's Cecil - Cecil Beader. I heard the intake of breath on the phone just then. I can tell you're overawed and this has now become a special night for you. Well, enjoy. If it's possible to enjoy anything in England.

Percy was about to tell him to go fuck himself, but it was hard to get a word in edgeways.

'I have my own production company right here in L.A. You might have heard of us - *Hemoglobin Productions*. Although I don't know if we distribute to Norwood County.'

Percy counter-attacked from an unexpected direction.

'You mean haemoglobin as in the iron-rich protein. The one which reversibly binds to oxygen to facilitate a significant increase in its solubility and transport within the bloodstream?'

'Shit, that's one wild and woolly cosmic button, you're hitting there, professor,' said Cecil, backing off a little.

'Still, you got the bit about the bloodstream right. We make slasher movies. Maybe you've seen *Straddle My Chainsaw* or *It Came Up Through The Bidet Plughole* or maybe *Gynocarnage II*, *Thursday 12th* or *There's a Werewolf in my Cesspit?*'

Percy was a bit miffed that Cecil hadn't understood his definition of haemoglobin, gained from the many hours of guilt-ridden background reading he'd done after Twinkle despatched his first victim. But, he felt, it was time to get down to business.

'Why do you want a wolf?'

'Because I'm looking for something that'll scare our audiences shitless.'

'Well, sorry to disappoint you,' said Percy. The sanctuary's brochure happened to be on the table top, so he read, 'We're running a serious eco-conservation project here, which will bring significant benefits to endangered species throughout the world. And climate change. So, in short, the wolf is not for hire, not at any price.'

There was a pause on the line, and Percy was sure he heard bleeps from a pocket calculator.

Eventually, Cecil spoke.

'How does a hundred thousand dollars sound?'

*

It turned out to be a two-week, or thereabouts, shoot in some yet-to-be-chosen mountains in Scotland.

'And,' said Cecil, 'we'll have animal welfare monitors, top veterinary practitioners, plus a team of eco-gurus with substantive mandates and programmes for the sustainable use and conservation of the planet's wildlife resources on hand to make sure everything is safe and humane. How big are its teeth?'

Percy emailed a photograph of Twinkle. Within seconds it arrived in L.A.

‘Holy shit,’ said Cecil.

The deal was done.

Percy did a quick calculation. One: a hundred thousand dollars would look very nice in his bank account.

Calculation over, he supposed it might be a good idea to sound as if he was interested in the film.

‘We’re remaking a children’s classic,’ said Cecil, ‘with an adult, Scotch twist - *Little Blood-Red McRiding Hood*. As you might guess, we’ll be featuring a shitload of blood, guts and gore. Some snowflakes think it’s kinda terrible what we do, and I gotta admit a lot of our fans chuck up in the first half hour. But look at it another way. Our films help raise public awareness of how easily and spectacularly, blood can be lost. Last two years in a row, we’ve been voted Feature Film Producers of the Year by United Blood Donor Services.’

Cecil said he would email the contract that night, and, if everything was OK, the cash tomorrow.

Percy agreed, and put the phone down.

He was ecstatic. A hundred thousand dollars, just for delivering a psychotic, incontinent, 200-pound timber wolf with an insatiable appetite for human flesh to a poncey film crew for a few days, in the back of nowhere. What could possibly go wrong?

Back in LA, Cecil Beader was also delighted. The wolf was fucking terrifying. He imagined those fangs sinking into some nun’s throat. Wow! Did they have nuns in Scotland? Maybe Little Blood-Red McRiding Hood could be a nun? But more importantly, who gives a shit! He picked up the phone and made a triumphant call.

‘It’s on!’ he said.

‘How much?’

‘A hundred thousand dollars.’

‘That’s great,’ replied Mac3, ‘what was the name of the film, again?’

13

Mick and Jim stared at the horizon, not that there was much of one in the 3Ls, as Lew's Hollywood paparazzi tales flowed over them. From time to time, their heads, bobbed in the gentle swell of his stories, or they floated in the turquoise shallows, or a piece of seaweed drifted by, or a seagull called as it flew high overhead.

This did not mean they were bored. It was more that they were gradually returning to as near normal as they had ever been.

Since they left the comfortable oblivion of the skips, life had not been easy. Their rare moments of solace had been filled with images of blood-stained rats, giant anacondas digesting swamp wardens, exploding hyenas, rotting zombies and the hissing of saltwater crocodiles from inside their office filing cabinets. Thankfully, that was all coming to an end.

As Lew's flow began to meander to its conclusion, Mick became aware that he was talking about employment.

'So how does that grab you?' said Lew, enthusiastically.

'Sorry, old fellow,' said Mick, hesitantly, 'but could you run that past us again?'

'It's simple, I'm offering you guys jobs as part-time paparazzi. You know how to use a camera?'

Mick explained.

'Great! Then it's a no brainer,' said Lew.

'I'll give you the location where the celebs are arriving - bear in mind, they'll not be major airports. They'll be places where the glitterati sneak into countries, unnoticed. Usually, Formica-clad shitholes that just got radar installed. But once the celeb's outside, assuming the arrivals area has a roof, they'll be in the stretch limo with a bottle of Bollinger, and it'll all be just a bad dream. But they'll have made it in, without *Hello* magazine getting shots for a 16-page supplement.'

'See, I've arranged to get tip-offs from the nobodies - people who work in cafeterias, car parks, shops, baggage handling and all that. They have their own bush telegraph on star clandestine arrivals, and they all report into *me*.'

'The end result is we get the exclusive advance notification of some star and his new mistress skulking into the country through what they think is a dead-end terminal, and bam - you're there waiting for them. You get the shots, I sell it on to the agencies, or direct to the media, and, after we've paid off the nobody, we split the money three ways. Fantastic!'

'Er,' said Mick, 'we appreciate your confidence in us, Lew, but this is all rather sudden. I'm sure you'll agree we need a bit of time to talk it over.'

'Sure,' said Lew, 'I got some shopping to do, so I'll leave you to chew the fat. But don't take too long, I'm already lining up the first assignments.'

Lew stood up and left.

'Bloody hell,' said Mick, 'bit of a turn up for the book.'

'I dunno,' said Jim, doubtfully, 'it's not far off what we do now.'

‘What we *do!*’ exclaimed Mick. ‘We’ve not done a corporate video for *three years* - not since *Pig rearing in your spare bedroom* for that lot at Global Sustainability.’

‘I still dunno,’ said Jim

‘Think about it,’ said Mick. ‘It’ll get us out of Soho and away from the 3Ls.’

‘Is that such a big deal?’

‘OK, then. It’ll be cool, like being under cover and we’ll be, sort of, continuing the humanitarian theme we started with the meths drinkers. Doing good for our fellow human beings.’

‘Absolute bollocks,’ said Jim. ‘What has taking sleazy snapshots of people going about their private business got to do with doing good for our fellow human beings?’

Jim was putting up a better-than-usual defence, and Mick was not happy. He was running out of counter-arguments and hated losing any verbal exchange with his life-long friend and enemy.

But Mick needn’t have bothered. He’d already hit the jackpot.

The phrase that resonated was ‘cool, like being under cover.’

Ever since Sean Connery uttered the first immortal line, ‘Bond, James Bond’, across the *Chemin de Fer* table in the 1960’s *Dr No*, Jim had had an ultra-secret alter-ego. He desperately wanted to be 007. But there was a snag. James Bond always had lots of people wanting to kill him. However, he was clever, cunning, sexy and sophisticated and had no problem beating people up or shooting them dead.

Over the last year, Jim had experienced what it was like to have people wanting to kill him, and he didn’t like it. To make matters worse, he wasn’t clever, cunning, sexy or sophisticated, and had no idea of how to beat people up or shoot them dead.

However, this paparazzi thing would give him a chance to be James Bond-sort-of-ish, without the possibility of a sudden, unexpected, violent death. And if anyone or anything got nasty, he had Mick to protect him. After a few seconds, he revisited that last thought, and cancelled it.

Still, on the positive side, he had everything he needed to realise his boyhood dreams - a great camera and lots of old Macintoshes. And, as there was very little chance of him getting hurt, he decided to go for it.

He looked Mick straight in the eye.

‘I still dunno.’

They stood up and decided to head back to the office. After two hours of drinking Perrier water with a slice, Mick and Jim were surprised to find that their office was a lot nearer to the 3Ls than they’d remembered. Previously, it had always been a long, plodding, heavy breathing trek, made more difficult by the fact that the pavements had a nasty habit of slowly corkscrewing in different directions.

They were on their way up to the office, in the old concertina-gated lift, when Jim officially gave in to Mick’s wild onslaught of reasons why the paparazzi thing was a good idea, even though the onslaught had got progressively weaker and less convincing. Jim had strung his answer out so that, if everything went chests up, he could blame Mick for getting them into it. See, he thought to himself, he was already getting cunning. All that was left was to select the right Macintosh.

*

As Lew wandered round Sainsbury's, he thought how lucky he'd been to meet Mick and Jim. First pub. First drink. First people. And they were perfect. Unremarkable, unimpressive, unnoticeable. And if they got seriously damaged or bumped off, no-one would miss them for a second.

14

At the *It's Alright He Won't Bite Urban Wolf Sanctuary*, Percy Spearmint was starting to sweat.

A hundred thousand dollars was a hell of a lot of money, but Twinkle was a hell of a lot of wolf. In fact, he was more than that, he was a large, fucking nightmare of a wolf. Apart from his generous contribution to London's mortality statistics, when he wasn't trying to tear down the bars of his cage, he was peeing on visitors or savaging huge quantities of raw, well-past-its-sell-buy-date meat.

Percy picked up a nine-foot pole which could be converted to a high-voltage cattle prod at the press of a panic button, and pushed it through the coiled razor wire into Twinkle's titanium-steel-reinforced cage.

How the fuck was he going to transport Twinkle to some shithole in Scotland, then keep the body count as low as possible, while they were shooting the film?

The thought of the two keepers Twinkle had already despatched made his blood run cold, which was more than could be said for the poor, wolf-loving, eco-biology students who had happily signed up as volunteers. Their blood had run extremely hot.

With the first one, it was all over in a second when Twinkle suddenly leapt up and removed his throat. The second student's death was even more disturbing. Percy was halfway through his sausage and scrambled eggs when the volunteer staggered in, his jeans round his ankles, wide-eyed and silently pointing to the place where his groin had been.

It was all very upsetting. And if it hadn't been for some of the more dubious contacts of the *Manchester Gleaner's* leading eco-journalist, Viceroy Smith, Percy could have been doing serious time for workplace negligence.

Fortunately, Viceroy's contacts were off-the-radar, international recycling specialists, and the remains of the two poor students were soon on their way to China, organically integrated into a major consignment of carbon-neutral eco-fertilizer.

Percy continued to sweat.

He went out to look at the wolf, just to get things in perspective. It was a bad move.

Twinkle was gnawing at the six-inch, high-tensile, case-hardened, steel padlock on his cage - all that stood between him and an unsuspecting world. He was halfway through it.

Percy put his hand into the top pocket of his jacket and tugged at his World Wildlife Fund-branded handkerchief to mop his forehead.

And out it dropped.

A small business card with a logo that looked like something disgusting splattered up a wall. It read *Implosion Productions*. A faint bugle - a rallying cry - sounded at the back of Percy's moist cranium. This could be it! The two weirdo drunks who brought Twinkle back a few nights ago. And yes! The bald, fat one, who smelled of sump oil and brandy, seemed to have some sort of bond with the four-fucking-legged nightmare.

When he'd first seen Mick on all-fours letting Twinkle play with his tie, Percy's first thought was to fire the tranquiliser dart at himself, as a quick way of avoiding seeing what was going to happen next.

But Twinkle didn't seem to mind. He let Mick take him to his cage and lock him up for the night.

It was bloody amazing. And what was even more amazing was the fact that, on the business card, among all the vomit-driven graphics, he could make out a telephone number.

One call, he thought, and his worries would be over.

Although, a casual observer may have been forgiven for thinking - How naïve can a wolf sanctuary manager get?

15

Jim lay back in his office hammock, fiddling, contentedly.

‘Look at that,’ he said proudly, ‘it must be 15 inches long, if it’s a centimetre.’

Mick replied, but didn’t turn round to look.

‘You know what the girls say, James, “if you’ve seen one 800mm f/5.6L USM Super Telephoto Lens, you’ve seen ‘em all”.’

‘Yeah, but it’s dead good, isn’t it?’

‘Cartier-Bresson couldn’t have put it better himself, although it does suffer a bit in translation. However, I don’t think you’ll get much chance to use whatever it is you’re fondling. From what Lew said, you’ll be up fairly close, in some dossy aerodrome, so I’d go wide angle, say 28mm, 3200 ISO using the well-loved zone focussing technique.’

‘You’ve been on the fucking internet.’

Mick was just about launch into a range of paper-thin assertions that he was Renaissance Man *par excellence* with a keen interest and knowledge across the whole of the artistic spectrum, from 3D interpretations of the Lascaux Cave paintings, through Bai Ton Shen’s plans to carpet the floor of the Taj Mahal with used condoms, to the technicalities of world-class street photography, when fortunately for him, the phone rang.

It was Lew, wanting a meeting.

‘Well, how about now?’ said Mick, spotting the rope ladder dangling over the prison wall. ‘I’ll get Jim to bring round his Canon 5D Mark II and the penis substitute he screws on the end, so you can give him a bit of advice about where to poke it.’

Lew was understandably confused, but said, ‘OK.’

Jim tipped out of the hammock, and gave a half-hearted glare in Mick’s direction.

‘You’ve been on the fucking internet,’ he repeated.

It was only a mumble.

So Mick disregarded it.

But if he’d listened carefully, Mick would’ve identified a mumble suffused with an inordinate amount of joyous, reckless and totally unsubstantiated 007 expectations.

*

Lew looked surprised as, within seconds of their arrival, and before anyone could say hello, Mick and Jim ran across his office, clutching their throats. They threw open the sash window overlooking Greek Street, then threw up spectacularly into what passed for fresh air in that part of Soho.

It dawned on Lew that, thanks to the extractor system, he must have become acclimatised to the office’s unique interior fragrance, or that other people’s gag reflexes must be less robust.

The men in the biohazard suits coming out off the massage parlour door, directly below the window, just assumed they’d got unlucky with some of Soho’s larger pigeons. And anyway, they had their work cut out investigating the massage parlour owner’s

assertion that his premises had been used in the recent past to house a serial killer's output.

'We could go to the 3Ls,' said Lew.

For the first time in their lives, Mick and Jim enthusiastically agreed to meet up in a place where only Perrier water with a slice was on offer. They breathed in a few healthy lungfuls of diesel-impregnated oxygen, clutched their throats again, spun on their heels and ran for the door.

*

'Hello, Mr Mick and Mr Jim, you are back to looking green, again. How come?'

Lew stepped in. 'Three Perriers with lemon, please.'

'You sure?' said May Piow Wong, looking concerned. 'They're ratcheting.'

'No, no,' said Lew, 'they're *retching*.'

Jim's throat convulsed again.

Lew winced.

'On second thoughts, honey, you may be right.'

Cocooned in the seedy familiarity, dubious beverages and outlandish décor of the 3Ls, Mick and Jim began slowly to recover. And as soon as their facial colour stabilised at something that more foppish dermatologists might refer to as Cerignola olive with a hint of pale chartreuse, Lew started his pitch.

'We got a name.'

'Name?'

'Papa Ratzy.'

'Paparazzi?'

'No, two words, Papa, like the Daddy, and Ratzy, like Ratzy. I'm going for an international brand - but only on a need-to-know basis.'

'Good,' said Mick hoping to shut the conversation down until his stomach acid was less likely to dissolve his pancreas.

Jim was ahead in the recovery stakes.

'What's all this need-to-know about?'

'Well, not many people need to know about Papa Ratzy because it's an exclusive service. So, I'd like you to keep it to yourselves, even if...'

'Even if what?' said Jim, looking a little worried.

'Even if your grandma asks you,' said Lew, in a rather unconvincing way.

'Do I detect that we might be well be asked about it by someone a bit more probing than Granny Chartwell?'

'It's just that celebs sometimes have employees.'

'Employees?'

'You know, *hombres* who sort things out for them.'

'You mean like weight-lifting, hair stylist *hombres* with knuckledusters?'

‘No, look, you’re getting the wrong idea. We’re going to be a class act. Stealing international scoops from under the others’ noses. So, the less people know about Papa Ratzy, the better.’

Lew pulled out a camera.

‘But first, I need mugs shots of you two. Look tough. No smiles.’

They felt so ill, it was easy to pull off the no smiles bit. Lew took the shots, and they sat back down.

‘So why have a name at all?’ asked Mick.

Lew couldn’t answer. It hadn’t been his idea. His financial backer had phoned an hour ago with the name - and wouldn’t take ‘No’ for an answer.

I mean the guy was providing stacks of cash to get the venture rolling, but, a month ago, when he’d signed the deal, his many friends in LA had warned him to expect this sort of intervention from Mac3.

16

The first job arrived just 24 hours after the reveal of the Papa Ratzky name. Mick took the call.

‘It’s like a taster,’ Lew assured him, ‘just to get you into the swing of things. Like iron out any creases.’

‘And the cash?’

‘Where?’

‘What time?’

‘Who?’

‘Got a photograph?’

During this rather blunt conversation, Jim was examining his recently purchased 28mm, 3200 ISO lens.

Mick put the phone down and went over to the office door. Someone had shoved a large brown envelope through the gap.

He opened the envelope, took out a photograph and handed it to Jim.

‘That’s him, Wednesday night, Lemfield Aerodrome, Berkshire, 8pm.’

‘Wonder if they call it LA?’ said Jim. ‘Who we pappin?’

‘Bloke called Geoffrey Blunstone.’

‘Never heard of him.’

‘It’s a test run, just so we can get the feel of it. Five hundred quid each. So no problems there. I didn’t ask about petrol costs.’

Jim couldn’t have cared less about the petrol. He had immediately reconsidered his rather flippant ‘Never heard of him’ comment, as his 007 fantasies elbowed their way to the front of his mind.

This was not Geoffrey Blunstone. This would be Grigori Blunstenov, KGB spymaster and assassin, on a mission to steal some atomic secrets. And James Chartwell (007 V.2) would be waiting for him, camera poised. This was James Chartwell (007 V.2) who could throw his hat across the office and land it on the hat stand, first time, without smirking. This was James Chartwell (007 V.2), fancied by Miss Money Penny, who, he was glad to say, occasionally came across with the goods. This would be James Chartwell (007 V.2) who wouldn’t get into a wimpy sweat when a tarantula crawled across his groin. This was James...

‘Oi, bladder brain,’ interrupted Mick, ‘any chance of a coffee, and when was the last time you changed your socks?’

Jim made two coffees and, post-Schubert, they sat down in the office armchairs to discuss the situation.

‘What’s he do, this Geoffrey bloke?’ said Jim.

‘He’s arriving to take up an important position at Lemfield and District Town Council.’

Despite his espionage-powered enthusiasm, Jim deflated slightly.

'Bit down-market, if you ask me.'

'Wait 'til you hear the rest.'

'Go on.'

'New Director of Sewage Treatment and Planning.'

'Shit.'

'Precisely - but stay cool. Remember "They Win. You Lose." I knew it'd be nothing exciting. This is a trial. You can understand Lew not wanting us to kick off with George Clooney. He needs to know we can get there on time, keep a low profile and get the shot without getting into trouble with the authorities or upsetting *das Sewagemeister*.'

'Do you honestly think there are going to be any authorities at Lemfield Aerodrome at eight o'clock on a Wednesday night?'

'I bloody well hope so. I mean, someone has to switch on the runway lights, and talk to the pilot saying all that stuff like over and out, Roger and Angels One Five, or whatever they say, nowadays.'

'Running time, 85 minutes.'

'Bloody hell, James, that's going in at the deep end. OK, production company?'

'Templar Productions.'

'Nice. What about technical advisor?'

'Wing Commander A J C Pelham Groom.'

'Smart arse session over. Back to the top.'

'*Angels One Five*, 1952. First British post-war production about the Battle of Britain.'

'Starring?'

'Jack Hawkins, Michael Denison, Dulcie Gray and John Gregson.'

'See, this is what it's like when you're an alcohol-free zone. Brilliant! Any extras?'

'Also featured Humphrey Lestocq as Flight Lieutenant "Batchy" Salter.'

'And for a mega-bonus, a hundred thousand in forged euros and an intimate, three-week cruise off the Seychelles with Cameron Diaz as the only crew member and personal masseuse, how is Humph connected with a turnip?'

Jim thought for a second. He looked up.

'Have you *really* got her phone number?'

'Yes,' said Mick, with an air of absolute authority.

'*Really*?'

'No,' said Mick.

'Well cruel deception apart,' said Jim, 'Humphrey Lestocq was one of the presenters on *Whirligig*, the first children's TV programme broadcast live from the BBC's Lime Grove Studios. He worked with a string puppet, Mr Turnip. And his catchphrase was "Goody, Goody Gumdrops".'

‘James, that was amazing! Just think Ms Diaz is wasting her time collecting ten million dollars a picture, putting up with A-list celeb pool parties, nationwide TV appearances, and the lust and worship of billions of fans, when she could be floating around in some barnacled old tub listening to your mind-numbing inconsequentials, and coping with your habit of scratching your groin with two hands.’

‘Jealous.’

‘OK. But nice to know we can still trip out the triv.’

‘Yeah! Must be a few modestly charged neurons still wandering round the old crania.’

‘Where *were* we?’

‘Fuck knows.’

‘Another coffee?’

‘Why not.’

Mick was busy doing the drinks, when Jim sat up suddenly.

‘I remembered where we were. Lemfield Aerodrome!’

Mick thought for a second before speaking.

‘Any chance we could get back to Cameron?’

17

In the 3Ls, May Piow Wong was doing a very good impression of being delighted with her new rucksack.

Mick and Jim stood proudly to attention and were pleased as Punch with her response to a very expensive present they'd spent a significant amount of time choosing in Cold Mountain Kit on Tower Bridge Road - a top-of-the-range Alpine Professional Arc'teryx Alpha FL 45.

'What is it?' smiled May.

Their inability to understand in any way what women like or want had been a major contribution to their synchronised divorces a couple of years' back. And here was yet more proof.

'It look like big, orange sausage, or something.'

Mick, despite the deflation, took time to explain what it was, and that they thought it might come in handy, if she ever got fed up with the grime and poisonous fumes of Soho, and fancied getting away to the countryside, or even some mountains.

May beamed her million-watt smile.

'Thank you so much Mr Mick and Mr Jim. Is very thoughtful of you. I get you fizzy water drinks now.'

Mick and Jim sat down in their alcove, pleased that May had liked their present.

May headed off to the bar carrying the rucksack, and made a mental note to have a word with Albert, who, she seemed to recollect, knew how to put things on Ebay.

*

At five o'clock that evening, Mick and Jim donned their grubby, inconspicuous mackintoshes, packed the camera and went down into the basement garage. The Morris Traveller was still there. During their recent period of penury, the bond between the two colleagues had become stronger than ever, as had their relationship with the tattered old car. And they would never forget how it had started first time when they were escaping an extended session on the electrodes with Charlie Sumkins' sadistic mega-enforcers, Vlad and Vic.

Now, they had cash, there was no way they could bring themselves to drive it to some East End scrap yard. So, they'd shelled out for a complete, some would say totally unnecessary, refurb. In addition to a total body repair and re-spray, there was a new 2-litre, 147bhp Isuzu Piazza turbocharged engine with Oerlikon Graziano racing gearbox and transmission, adapted Penske shock absorbers and brakes that worked. They'd tested it on the M1, and the rough timing was 0-60 mph in 2.7 seconds - the same as a Bugatti Veyron EB. Top speed was 147 mph. That, they thought, would do very nicely.

Once again, the Morris Traveller started first time, although both Mick and Jim would've expected that, having spent around £80,000 on the spruce-up. Mick dabbed the accelerator and the sonic vibrations from the Subaru performance exhaust nearly lifted the underground garage door off its hinges.

Jim was very happy. It wasn't Mr Bond's Aston Martin, but he was sure the new Mega-Mozza could give the DB5 a run for its money along the *Moyenne Corniche*, whatever that was.

*

When they arrived at Lemfield Aerodrome, there was good news and bad news. The good news was that the main airport building had electricity. The bad news was that the main airport building was a rusty Portakabin - with a 40-watt, unshaded bulb hanging over a hand-painted, hardboard sign. This was not something to inspire confidence in the establishment's approach to technology.

They parked up and went inside. It wasn't as bad as they'd thought. There were, in fact, two Portakabins joined together. The first cabin had a small snacks kiosk with no snacks, two wooden benches and two doors. One door had a sign over it, saying Control Tower and the other a sign reading Toilets and Arrivals.

The room also had a sign hanging from the ceiling with the message Welcome to Lemfield Aerodrome Departure Lounge.

Three people were sat on the benches, no doubt having a final lounge before their departures. Mick and Jim joined them. They sat for a few minutes in fluorescent-tubed silence.

This silence was eventually shattered by the scream of microphone feedback coming over the wall speakers. For Mick and Jim, it kindled fond memories of their days in *Flayed*, the Slade tribute band of their middle-aged youth. However, like all good things, it ended almost before it began. The feedback was brought under control, and a voice spoke.

'Alpha Bravo 178, do you read me?'

Jim gave Mick a thumbs-up. The place might not have a real tower, but there was obviously someone in control.

'Come in, Alpha Bravo 178, do you read me?'

A voice crackled back.

'Alpha Bravo 178 receiving you loud and clear.'

Mick and Jim suspected crossed wires and that they shouldn't be hearing this, but they both thought it'd make a pleasant change - quite exciting, really - listening to professionals at work, even though it was probably only an incoming Cessna.

'This is Lemfield Aerodrome. Runway clear and ready for you to land, over.'

'This is Alpha Bravo 178, where's the fucking runway?'

'Where it always is, you tosser.'

'Are you sure you switched the lights on?'

'The lights are on, try looking out the fucking window.'

'Don't you "fucking window" me.'

'Have you fixed the windscreen wipers?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'They fell off. But I can see if I squint my eyes up tight.'

'Jesus, Harry, have you been drinking?'

Static.

'Have - you - been - *drinking?*'

Pause.

'I fly better when I'm drunk.'

'I know that. You were sober last week when you nearly crashed.'

'I wasn't and I didn't.'

'I told you not to text when you're taking off.'

'I was *not* fucking texting. I was on Instagram.'

The atmosphere in the departure lounge became, quite appropriately, funereal.

Then the pilot's voice broke through.

'I can see it! I can see it!'

'Thank Christ! Clear to land Alpha Bravo 178.'

'Hang on, it might be the M1.'

There was a dreadful pause.

'No it's alright, it's a runway. With a bit of luck, it'll be yours. Only joking.'

'Get the fucking thing down.'

A few minutes later, a loud bang, augmented by terrified screams, came over the radio link.

'Whoa! Hang on a minute,' said Harry the Aviator, 'I'll get it back on the tarmac.'

A few seconds later, there was a ear-splitting screech of tyres.

'There!' cried Harry, triumphantly, 'all done.'

Everyone in the departure lounge looked exhausted.

Control had the last word.

'You got a bunch of guys about to turn blue. We're breathing again. Thanks for fucking nothing.'

Then Harry had the last word,

'Sorry, ladies and gentlemen, the door's jammed. Anyone got a hammer...?'

Five minutes later, resplendent in his pilot's uniform and totally unaware of the accidental transmission, Harry beamed confidently into the departure lounge.

'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, it's my pleasure to be flying you down to Lulsgate Bottom International this evening, if you'd just like to step this way.'

Nobody moved.

'Oh well,' said Harry, with a dismissive hiccup, 'please yourself.'

The other people on the benches suddenly decided they didn't really need to go to Lulsgate Bottom that evening. One of them got elbowed into the doorframe in the rush.

Harry seemed oblivious to the panic. He turned and opened a door next to the snack bar. Mick got a quick glimpse of the 'controller', and noticed Harry slipping a hip flask

out of his immaculately tailored jacket. As that door closed, the other door clattered open.

Three dishevelled passengers staggered in. They all looked as though they'd aged ten years in the last five minutes. Which was true.

Mick was stunned by their wide-eyed, otherworldly appearance. But Jim was right onto it.

He'd spotted the target, and, with camera on burst mode, was grabbing the shots.

Geoffrey Blunstone, the new Director of Sewage Treatment and Planning for Lemfield and District Town Council, didn't react as they'd anticipated. Despite being in a state of shock, he didn't scuttle off into the anonymity of the night. He didn't get aggressive about how his privacy had been invaded. He didn't demand to be escorted by a trauma counsellor to a safe space. Neither did he berate Mick and Jim as the scum of the earth, as diabolical parasites on the face of humanity. In fact, given his recent, very-near-death experience, he seemed quite chuffed.

He smiled, sort of, and stretched out his hand. However, it was trembling slightly and rather damp.

'Hi, call me Geoff.'

Jim shook his hand.

Geoff was putting one hell of a brave face on it.

'I must say I didn't expect a photographer - very impressive.'

He looked across at Mick.

'And a reporter too!'

Mick and Geoff shook hands.

'Mind if I sit down, that was a bit of an experience back there.'

Mick nodded.

'Right, where do you want to do the interview? I'm as ready as I'll ever be. Take my mind off the Red Baron.'

Mick's mouth hung open. He hadn't planned for this, at all. Still, they'd just earned £500 each for doing, more or less, sod all. God knows what they'd get for papping Simon Cowell. So it might be best to have a bit of 'added value' to report back to Lew.

'Here would be great,' said Mick.

He sat down opposite Geoff, and immediately, his mind went blank.

Geoff smiled in anticipation.

But the only question Mick could think of was one that he'd so often asked himself, 'How did you become so deeply immersed in sewage?'

18

‘Would you like me to check that you’ve got that down properly?’

Mick un-drooped his eyelids.

For two excruciating hours, on and off, his field of vision had been dominated by Geoff’s supercharged enthusiasm and hyper-expressive features, although he was aware that Jim was lying on one of the benches, snoring quietly, in a wet sort of way.

‘Er, no thanks Geoff, I’ll be alright.’

‘I don’t mind checking your notes.’

Mick looked down at his pad. It was full of pencil squiggles and a drawing of the penis he would like to have, if God ever decided to recalibrate the human race.

‘Difficult, old boy. It’s in shorthand.’

‘No problem, I did a shorthand course as part of my local authority exams.’

‘Yes, but this is a method I developed for myself, faster but more complicated.’

‘Oh, alright then.’

Mick was quite pleased he’d managed to come out on top, even though he was semi-conscious and had no idea what he was talking about. The ability to come out on top, even though you were semi-conscious and had no idea what you were talking about was a key skill for a corporate video entrepreneur, and Mick was proud that he had it in shedloads.

Geoff didn’t realise he’d been fobbed off. In his current mood, he was unfoboffable. Mick assumed that the sewage supremo’s techno-babble was powered by the euphoria of having, so narrowly, cheated the Grim Reaper, otherwise known as the Grim Pissed Pilot. But that didn’t make it any more pleasant or bearable when Geoff kicked off again.

‘When we started, you remember I went through the early sewage systems in Mesopotamia around 2500 BC, I’m sure you’d agree that was pretty straightforward.’

Mick nodded.

‘By the way, if you need to brush up on any of that, you can go to Harold Farnsworth Gray, *Sewerage in Ancient and Medieval Times*. That’s in the *Sewage Works Journal*, Volume 12, No. 5, September 1940, pages 939 to 946, if I remember correctly. Although it might be 944.’

Mick wrote ‘944’ and ‘fuck me’ in his notebook, and his eyelids drooped again.

‘But what really worries me...’

Mick’s eyelids creaked open.

‘...is that your readers need to be able to differentiate between the various technologies we’ve covered. Are you sure you’ll be happy explaining rotating biological contactors, capacitive deionisation, flocculation, thermal hydrolysis and, of course, the all-important regenerative thermal oxidation process?’

Despite it only being a few seconds since his shorthand, fobbing-off victory, Mick was sinking fast.

‘You see,’ said Geoff, ‘I feel it’s really important your readers understand how Anoxic SBR can be used for anaerobic processes, such as the removal of ammonia via Anammox, or the study of slow-growing microorganisms, particularly when the reactors are purged by flushing with inert gas, and there is no...’

Geoff raised his eyebrows in an expectant sort of way, indicating that Mick should complete the sentence.

Mick countered with a coughing fit.

‘...aeration,’ said Geoff, helpfully.

Mick was desperate. He was the corporate video kiddy. He was used to dealing effortlessly with mad clients, heading Spielbergitis off at the pass, talking them out of multi-million pound creative inputs, explaining why their wife couldn’t be in the video, or why he turned up to the shoot smelling of brandy. And now here, he was being swamped by a rampant enthusiasm of effluents. Geoff was fucking unstoppable. He needed a dose of weapons-grade Imodium, quick - a barrelful, at least.

However, in this heartfelt analysis, Mick had overlooked one key fact. He was not alone. He was part of a team - the Implosion Productions team. And, as any teamwork training course or seminar will tell you, team members are there for each other.

Geoff was moving on to something about sustainable, ecologically diverse, low-carbon footprints, when Implosion Productions’ teamwork and collaborative values came powerfully, if accidentally, into play.

Mick’s bacon would be saved, but the dental bills would be enormous.

19

May Piow Wong started to beam her one million watt smile into the alcove. But there was a sudden, localised blackout and the back-up generator failed.

‘Mr Jim,’ she cried, looking very worried, ‘you get more damage since you been on fizzy water than when you on half pint of Chinese sherry, with ten quadruple brandy chasers.’

‘Ib oride,’ said Jim bravely.

Mick put a comforting arm on Jim’s shoulder and explained how his badly bruised and still slightly bleeding colleague had been on a dangerous photoshoot for the government, and how, when manoeuvring himself into position for a particularly difficult shot, he’d banged his face on some technical equipment. He’d spent all morning having his face shot full of anaesthetic, prior to some serious restorative bridgework.

‘Well, Mr Jim should no work on bridges, it obvious not very safe.’

Mick thought it was best to leave it there, so he switched to ordering Perriers all round.

Lew was a bourbon man himself, but, if the limeys drank fizzy water, then he did too. Maintaining good relations with the patsies was all part of the plan.

Obviously, Mick had given Lew the full story, before they got to the 3Ls. How Jim had fallen asleep during the enforced Geoff interview and how, at the crucial moment, when Mick was eventually being backed into a corner, had fallen, face-first, off the bench, creating the perfect excuse for a rapid retreat.

Geoff was planning to enlighten and excite Mick and his readers with some comparative cost-efficiency analyses of pressured and gravity-fed sewer systems. But there was no way he could continue, as Mick pulled Jim up by the scruff of the neck and held him in space, like an unconscious, heavily bleeding get-out-of-gaol-free card.

With his comatose colleague slumped over his shoulder, Mick left the Lemfield Aerodrome Departure Lounge, pausing at the door to promise Geoff he’d send a copy of the article when it was finished.

Geoff said, ‘Thanks.’

He didn’t hear Mick mumble, ‘No flocculation chance, mate,’ as he carried his unlikely saviour out into the cold night air.

*

Lew liked the Geoff photographs. He apologised to Jim, and said he felt bad about his facial injuries, particularly as this was just a test run. However, he’d take care of the dentist’s bills, no problem.

For a second, it occurred to Mick that this largesse with fees and dental expenses didn’t tie in with Lew’s low-cost, foul-smelling office, which made Implosion Productions’ flea pit seem like something financed and designed by Bill Gates. But unfortunately, it was only for a second.

‘We go live tomorrow night,’ said Lew, ‘provided your pearlies have recovered enough. I’ll courier the details over, later. But are you going to be OK, James?’

Jim was just about to say no he fucking wasn't, when that word 'James' re-triggered his 007 fantasies. What was he thinking of? James B was a professional. He didn't let a little bit of pain get in the way of *anything*. Say he'd had Goldfinger's laser frying his gonads, then later that evening, Pussy Galore invited him round for an evening's outrageous on her rotating, vibrating waterbed. What would James say? Would he come out with, 'Sorry, Pussy, but Godzilla got nuked this afternoon and I fancy a night off.' No he bloody-well wouldn't. He'd be in like Flynn. Of course, Lew's proposal didn't offer the same incentives as Pussy's, but, nevertheless, it was a matter of principle.

So Jim said, 'Yeb, darralbi fnine.'

*

When the courier dropped Lew's envelope over to Implosions Productions, Mick acted like he'd just won Videocameraman of the Year.

He paraded it around the office, switching on the microwave, as he passed, to add some music to the event.

Eventually, he got round to the grand opening.

'This is it, James, Papa Ratzy Mission II. Taraal'

He took out a sheet of paper, and began to read.

'Tomorrow night, Five Crowns Hotel, private helipad, 7pm. Bleck Hill, just north of Brighton. Five hundred notes each. I could get used to this. And, *guess who?*'

Jim was sat in an armchair, dribbling a mug of tomato soup down his heavily anaesthetised face. Even though the soup was building up to form substantial layers, it was clear from his expression and his answer that he disapproved of the question.

'I ad no fnukin idea, you stupig baftard,' he said. 'Wof a stupig fnukin kwefton? I meed, der mus be fnuking billyonf of fnuking peeperl who it cud bee.'

'Your eloquence doth you credit, James. I can see it'll be only a matter of time before you're ready to be presented at court.'

'Fnuk court! Who id it?'

'Kitty van Husen!'

'Kiffy van Hoofen?'

'Yeah! Kitty van Husen.'

'Nedder fnuking herd of er.'

'She's in that American Reality TV thing - you know about rednecks looking for radioactive bits that have dropped off UFOs. She's the Controller, down a bunker deep under Los Alamos. PVC jumpsuit with holes in it. You must remember, it's called *The Y-Files*.

'Day nedder find fnuk all.'

'Absolutely correct, Oh articulate one. Bit like that *Finding Bigfoot*. Ought to be called *Not Finding Bigfoot*.'

'Day nedder find fnuk all.'

'Spot on, my old geranium, but can I suggest that, given your oral impediments, you avoid repetition?'

‘OK. Day nedder *fnukin* find fnuk all.’

‘That’s more like it - maybe they should call it *The Why Fucking Bother Files?*’

Jim tried to laugh, but he only succeeded in blowing a large, tomato soup nostril bubble, which then popped spectacularly and joined the rest of the beverage on his dead face.

Mick decided this was not the time for witty conversation. He heaved himself up and went to look for a bucket and sponge.

20

It had just gone dark as Mick and Jim drove up the gravel driveway to the Five Crowns Hotel. The two-storey building gave a nodding respect to William Morris's Red House, the symbol of the Arts & Crafts movement in England, and was bathed in warm, welcoming, planet-destroying light. The red brick walls were covered in ivy and, from what they could see through the mullioned windows, everything inside looked cosy and expensive.

'Bit of a leg up from Lemfield Aerodrome, eh?' said Mick.

Jim had more or less recovered from his partial anaesthetisation, but was being careful. So he just said, 'Yes.'

They'd already been onto Google maps and knew that the helipad was on a special cordoned-off section of the huge lawn at the back of the hotel.

'No need to bother the receptionist, I think,' said Mick, 'especially not the way you look, what with your half-brick limp and partially frozen features. I don't think I could cope with, "Excuse me, sir, he didn't you play one of the gargoyles in *I, Frankenstein?*"'

'2014, directed Stuart Beattie, starring Aaron Eckhart. Bill Nighy and Yvonne Strahovski,' said Jim, absent-mindedly, as he reached onto the back seat to get his camera.

'Nice to see your pronunciation returning, and nice to get in a few recent trivs,' said Mick as he parked the Morris Traveller behind a large Rolls Royce. No need to attract attention with their down-market, 147 mph transportation.

'Worldwide take to date?'

'Seventy-one million dollars against a sixty-five million budget.'

'Welcome back.'

*

There was a little bit of a moon. On the horizon, they could make out the dark outline of the South Downs, and much closer, a painted, white H showing where the helicopter had to land.

Fortunately, during their rucksack expedition to Cold Mountain Kit on Tower Bridge Road, Mick had picked up a couple of folding canvas stools. Admittedly, he could've furnished a two-bed semi with Ikea stuff for the same price. But now, they were about to come into their own.

Mick and Jim moved into the cover of some bushes, opened the stools and sat on them. It was getting chilly, so they pulled their paparazzi mackintoshes close, and Mick took out a thermos full of hot tomato soup and a couple of mugs.

He handed a mug to Jim with the warning that there was no possibility of a shower, or hose down, if he didn't manage to aim the soup down the inside of his throat.

*

They had a good view of the landing site, and a good view of the approaching lights in the sky. As the helicopter came nearer, it switched on a searchlight, presumably to locate the H sign. Mick and Jim stood up. Jim had a James Bond tingle and took out his

camera. He was ready. He'd checked the settings in the car, the flash was fully charged and he was confident.

The helicopter landed and two people got out - a small woman and a large man.

Mick and Jim crouched down until the couple were clear of the blades. As the helicopter took off, they stepped out of the bushes.

'Miss van Husen, over here!' called Jim.

As soon as she turned, he let off a burst of flashes. It was in the bag. Simple.

The large man walked over to Jim.

'Hey!' he said jovially, 'A reception committee! We weren't expecting that. Nice of you to come over and do the meet and greet thing. This is our first time in the UK, so thank you, thank you, thank you.'

He looked down at Jim's camera.

'Say, isn't that a Cannon 5D Mark II, I've been thinking of getting one, mind if I take a quick look?'

'Not at all,' said Jim, and handed the camera over.

The big man took the camera with his left hand and simultaneously delivered a vicious right cross to the side of Jim's face.

Jim staggered back and would've fallen, had not Mick moved swiftly behind him. As Mick would later swear, vehemently, this move was to support Jim, not to use Jim as a human shield.

The upshot was that, because Mick put his arms under Jim's armpits, Jim remained upright, enabling the big man to smack another two heavy punches to Jim's already battered features.

The big man stopped punching, and held the camera up in front of Jim's face. This was a pretty pointless exercise, as Jim was now unconscious. Nevertheless, he held up the Cannon 5D with both hands and began to twist it. The camera started to shatter and bits of the body splintered in all directions. When he had half a wrecked 5D in each hand, he tossed the bits into the bushes. Jim might have missed the message contained in this display, but Mick was left in no doubt.

The big man joined the woman and, arm-in-arm, they walked off towards the hotel.

Given the battering Jim had just taken, 'Enjoy your stay in the UK,' might not have been the most appropriate thing Mick could've shouted, but he did anyway. The bastard might come back for seconds, and anyway, if they were both beaten unconscious, who would get Jim back to the safety of the office.

*

It took Mick the best part of half an hour to drag Jim's unconscious body round the side of the hotel and across the car park to the Traveller. When he dumped Jim onto the back seat, he stood there in the moonlight, hanging on to the Traveller's roof, gasping for air and coated in sweat. His muscles were on fire, his head was pounding and he was sure he'd pulled something that would mean wearing a surgical truss for the rest of his life. God, he was unfit, and God, he felt terrible. Was it time for the long-overdue heart attack?

After five minutes desperately trying to recover from his exertions, Mick reluctantly began to have a few thoughts about Jim, who was still out like a light.

As he leaned over check his condition, Jim's eyes flashed open.

'Oh thank God,' said Mick, 'you're conscious.'

'I've been conscious for the last half hour.'

'What!' gasped Mick, 'you mean you let me bollock myself dragging you...'

'Reckon that makes us even,' said Jim.

He treated Mick to a smile, which featured torn lips and a horrific number of broken, blood-stained teeth.

'Enjoy you stay in the UK, for Christ's sake.'

Before Mick could reply, Jim passed out. Properly, this time.

21

Jim left the office early the next morning to have his busted mouth and freshly smashed teeth dealt with. He was obviously in pain.

Unbeknown to him, Mick was also in pain. But it wasn't the pain than required two hours of intensive dental treatment, a three-hour wait in A&E and six badly-applied stiches, it was the pain of knowing he'd been a real bastard.

He'd let Jim down. He should've stood up to that big bloke, even though it might have meant them both being found dead of hypothermia when the early morning cleaner came to flick a feather duster round the helipad.

While travelling back from the Five Crowns, he'd concentrated, first, on keeping the Traveller's 2-litre, 147bhp Isuzu Piazza turbocharged engine under some sort of control. But he also began thinking of how he could make things up to poor old James - lying there on the back seat, snoring blood-red bubbles. Yes, the little shit had nearly killed him by pretending he was unconscious, but what was becoming slightly puffed out, compared to some American bodyguard smacking the living daylights out of you.

He really began to wish that *he* could take over Papa Ratzy's photography. He was, after all, a professional video cameraman. Despite having no medical training, he could tell that, in this state, Jim wouldn't have the wherewithal to press the release button, let alone aim the camera.

If Jim got seriously worked over on Papa Ratzy Mission III, he might never recover. That was a hell of a sobering thought. But there again, Mick had no desire to take any sledgehammer punches and no desire to be nobly hospitalised, just because he felt sorry for the dozy sod. Something else was needed. But what? He switched on the car radio.

BBC Radio 4 was broadcasting a play. It was about Svengali and some people called, Little Billee and Mrs Bagot. The characters rang bells, but the name of the play escaped him.

He was just going under the M25 interchange, when he remembered - *Trilby*. And thus, he thought, are great ideas born.

*

As soon as Jim had left for the dentist's, Mick got organised. First a visit to Lock & Co in St James's Street to buy a trilby. Eye-wateringly expensive, but a perfect fit. As he walked out of the shop, he thought he might stop and buy a copy of the *Sporting Life* to really look the part. But before he came across a newsagents, he arrived at the doors of Sneekivids Inc, where he purchased the business - a remote-controlled, 1080-P HD spycam, offering pro quality stills, video and audio with 16 gig of memory. He headed back to the office.

An hour later, after a lot of grunting and bad language, mainly from Polly the Parrot, the camera was secured inside the trilby. The lens was impossible to see, and the hat was ready for covert action.

Mick stood in the office and, by tilting his head ever so slightly, was able to take stills of the microwave. Perfect. He also took video of the microwave playing *The Trout* by Franz Schubert (1797 to 1828). Perfect. He closed the blinds and took stills and video in low-light. Excellent. He couldn't wait for Jim to get back.

When Jim eventually returned, he was not in a good shape or frame of mind.

He laid his badly bruised and swollen face, along with his stitches and other damaged bits, on the office sofa and looked totally exhausted. He indicated, with a mixture of V-signs and middle-finger salutes, that this was not the time to engage in banter, recriminations, or idle or not-so-idle threats.

He dozed off, almost immediately.

So Mick sat down opposite him and began re-running the microwave video, during which, not surprisingly, he too fell fast asleep.

22

Later in the day, Lew popped round to Implosion Production's office and wrote a cheque for Jim's dental repair work. Mick had that thought again. A Harley Street chopper doc on emergency rates - and it was no problem, like water running off a duck's back, or in this case, blood running off a fucking stupid soundman-come-paparazzo's face.

That apart, Lew was impressed by Mick's remotely operated trilbycam.

'What does Jim think about it?'

'Well,' said Mick, staring at Jim's gently dozing, pulverised face, 'if he ever recovers, I'm sure he'll be very pleased not to be in the firing line.'

'Oh, yeah,' said Lew, remembering, 'I must cover off the cost of those stitches to his lips.'

'No problem,' said Mick, 'that's a freebie from our famous National Health Service.'

'Jesus,' said Lew, 'no wonder it's free, my Aunt Debbie could've done a better job with her Singer Treadle.'

'No, no, no,' said Mick, 'I won't have a word said against the NHS. It's a national treasure. Fantastic service. Brilliant. Except when you're ill and need to get better.'

'Anyway,' said Lew, 'have I got something for you guys! Tomorrow night is our first really big one. I've been offered amazing sums for a pap of this lady. She's Miss Elusive. She's been an A-Lister for five years, and, up 'til now, there hasn't been a single pap. Red carpet - sure. And posed publicity - on set and on the beach - but otherwise, nothing. And the thing is, nobody knows why she's making a secret visit to the UK. New boyfriend? Husband split? Girlfriend. Transgender friend, or with a bit of luck, orgies. I can't tell you why this is so important. Just get the shot. They'll find out what she's doing - or they'll make it up - but they need to run big time with that pic.'

'Who is it?' said Jim waking up.

'Zizi Stromboli.'

Before Jim could say, 'Never fucking heard of her,' Mick jumped in. If this was going to be a big earner, maybe the first of many big earners, he certainly didn't want to piss Lew and the Papa Ratzy organisation off.

'That's fantastic,' he enthused. 'Yeah, come to think of it, I've never seen a pap shot of Zizi, and we check the *Daily Mail's Sidebar of Shame* every day, like now we're, you know, in the business. You must have seen them? Zoi Swampgas flashes her peachy derriere, bringing a touch of San Tropez glamour to Skegness Lido, and all that.'

Jim couldn't resist the challenge.

'Cumbrian rapper, Felony, flaunts her side boob at the Gas Fitter Awards in downtown Morecambe.'

'Yeah,' said Lew, with as much disinterest as he could muster, 'but man, *this* is going to be big, big, big. It's tomorrow night, 8pm. Wendelsham Airfield, near Biggin Hill. It's not really an airfield, just a landing strip owned by a farmer. But the farmer's cleaning lady is on my database, and she says him and his wife have been talking about nothing else all week.'

Lew leaned over.

‘Here are your Special Branch ID cards. You’re there acting on behalf of the British Government, just to make sure there are no stalkers or kidnap attempts.’

Mick looked at the ID cards featuring the snaps Lew had taken in the 3Ls. They were OK, but he thought people might find it a little strange that the offices of Special Branch had a Pirelli calendar and a Happy Hour notice on the wall.

‘Don’t farmers have shotguns?’ said Jim.

‘Yeah, but in strictest confidence, the farmer guy has just been sectioned under the Mental Health Act, so he’ll probably not even *be* there - you should be fine.’

Jim was too tired to be reassured, and too tired to start worrying. And anyway, James Bond never gave a fuck about that sort of detail.

‘So, that’s it!’ said Lew. ‘Have fun!’

Going down in the lift, Lew began to worry. It wasn’t the clanking noise from the motor, or the juddering, or the sudden, one-foot freefalls, it was just that he wasn’t sure exactly when the mental health authorities were coming to collect the farmer. He might still be there when they arrived. Still, Mick and Jim getting their asses pumped full of hot lead was immaterial. As long as they got the photographs. Those pics had to be mega-brilliant. They had to be world-class.

He need not have worried about the photographs. They *would* be brilliant. Superb shots of Zizi Stromboli looking glamorous and sexy - the shots the whole world had been waiting for. The only snag was that the euphoria they generated in the Papa Ratzy office would soon subside, as Lew started to receive a range of well-meant death threats from a variety of anonymous, international unpleasantaries.

23

That evening, before they went down to the 3Ls for their Perrier and slice, Mick and Jim looked up Zizi Stromboli on the internet. It was true, she was beautiful, enigmatic and, without doubt, an A-Lister.

But, somehow, Ms Stromboli had slipped under Mick and Jim's forensic, cinematic trivia radar system. Mind you, as they readily admitted, they were a bit behind the times when it came to films of the last 20 years.

As Mick had said, he didn't remember stuff about them, because there wasn't much stuff worth remembering. He'd no problem recalling that uncredited actors in the crowd at the chariot race in the 1925 production of *Ben Hur*, included Lillian Gish, Samuel Goldwyn, Harold Lloyd and Mary Pickford, and that Fay Wray, Myrna Loy and Carole Lombard played uncredited slave girls.

But remembering how many breast implants Zizi Stromboli had had in the last five years - and, even to Mick's untrained eye, there had been quite a few - was nowhere near as much fun. Although countless millions of today's, so-called, film fans might seriously disagree.

Jim rolled out of his hammock. His face looked a lot better. At first glance, he looked like a man who'd just gone ten rounds with a baseball-bat-wielding, psychopathic drunk. So, all in all, it was a big improvement.

After Jim wandered off down the corridor for his morning ablutions, Mick began to rethink the implications of the upcoming paparazzi assignment. They would be posing as Special Branch agents, the *crème de la crème* of the British Police Service. And here was agent Jim who obviously wasn't physically capable of stopping someone from bashing his face in, pausing for breath, then bashing it in some more.

When Jim returned, shell-shocked by the images in the bathroom mirror, he was keen to go along with Mick's suggestion. Mick and his trilby would handle this alone. Jim would stay outside the farmhouse in the Traveller, keys in the ignition. He convinced himself that there was a James Bond film where 007 had sat in his DB5, while someone else went in and did the dangerous assignment.

Jim walked over and dropped the cover over Polly who had was now regularly singing *The Trout* by Franz Schubert (1797 to 1828), interspersed with machine gun fire. He then got carefully back into his hammock while Mick lounged over to the sofa with a coffee, took out his Special Branch ID and had a good look. First, he thought he looked pretty good, considering. He was leaner and meaner and less blotchy. Maybe the Perrier diet was having an effect? Second, he noticed the Pirelli calendar and the Happy Hour notice were more in focus than he was. For a leading Los Angeles paparazzo, Lew Roller was a bloody awful photographer.

*

Jim switched off the engine and rolled the Traveller up to the farmhouse front door. There was no point in revving up 110 decibels of racing engine, when you were supposed to be discrete, low profile Special Branch operatives.

Mick got out, stood up and made sure his trilby was firmly in place.

He walked over to the large, oak door and knocked.

The door opened a few inches and, within a second, both barrels of a shotgun were thrust against his quivering nostrils.

‘Who you?’ said a voice, from behind the door.

‘Agent 72613TTL.’

‘72613TTL?’

‘Yes.’

‘Last time I heard summat like yon, it were on a bottle of non-iodine-based teat dip.’

‘No,’ said Mick, as the business end of the shotgun slid smoothly on a film of sweat from his nostrils to the thin layer of bone covering his prefrontal cortex.

‘I’m with Special Branch, sent to make sure Miss Stromboli is kept safe, during her arrival in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Island.’

It was a good choice of words, clear and to the point, if only he hadn’t been stammering so much.

A situation, no matter how desperate, can turn on a word. And that’s exactly what happened. In this case, the word was ‘flagstone.’

‘Flagstone!’ cried a woman’s voice. ‘Flagstone, I’ve told you before, you’re *not* a meet-and-greet type person.’

The door opened fully to reveal a large, rosy-cheeked woman wearing a Paisley-patterned pinny with flour dust up to her elbows. With one swift movement, she removed the shotgun and smiled.

‘You must excuse Flagstone, he can be a bit nervous when he meets new people. Still, tomorrow, you’ll be off to a nice warm place where you can like everyone, won’t you Flagstone?’

‘I should’ve shot the fucker,’ mumbled Flagstone.

‘Hello,’ said the large woman. ‘I’m the lady of the house, Florence Flagstone, how can I help?’

Flagstone turned and trudged, round shouldered, back along the hallway. It was a strange corridor, illuminated by an un-shaded, clear, 40-watt bulb, with large sacks of potatoes stacked on either side, leaving a narrow strip of dusty, threadbare carpet in the middle. Bit of a contrast with the Range Rover SV Autobiography and the Ferrari FF grand tourer parked up on the gravel outside, thought Mick. Still, that was farmers for you. Five million in the bank, 400 acres of land paid for in 1932 and they still felt compelled to do the ‘get off my land’ routine. With that sort of collateral, Mick would’ve had a pad in Monte Carlo and be spending all his time shagging supermodels.

Idle thoughts over, Mick explained who he was, showed her his Special Branch card with his thumb over the Pirelli calendar and Happy Hour notice. He was delighted to see he was believed and welcomed.

Mrs Flagstone made cups of tea, and they sat down in front of a log fire, which, for once, was actually roaring.

‘We’re so excited to have Miss Stromboli landing on our little airstrip.’

There was a grating noise from the kitchen table.

Mick turned his head.

‘Don’t worry about Flagstone, he likes to spend the evenings sharpening his bull emasculator tools.’

‘No problem,’ said Mick, wincing slightly, as he checked the shotgun was still well out of Flagstone’s reach.

Mick realised two things. First, he was ten minutes early and, second, he was talking to someone who had an interest in films, if that’s what you could call Miss Stromboli’s output. So he eased into chat mode.

‘Tell me, Mrs Flagstone, which of Miss Stromboli’s films do you like?’

‘Well, I didn’t like her early films, what do they call them - slashing films - you know with lots of blood everywhere. Like *Straddle My Chainsaw* or *It Came Up Through The Bidet Plughole*. They were awful.’

Mick nodded sympathetically, and made a mental note to download them from Netflix as soon as he was back in the office.

Flagstone scraped a file along the cutting edge of his emasculator.

‘I only bought the films as a diversion for Flagstone. By the way, can I take your hat?’

‘No, I’ll be alright,’ said Mick. ‘Rough mission, last week. Got hit on the head with an industrial ratchet. Not a pretty sight.’

The explanation was accepted, and she continued.

‘But her later films, I love. So romantic.’

‘Such as?’

‘Oooh!’ she said, and looked to the ceiling for inspiration.

Inspiration came.

‘Honey, I burned the cucumber.’

Mick nodded in serious agreement, as his brain dropped two inches inside his skull.

Despite his throat tightening, he managed to say, ‘Any others?’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Flagstone warming to her theme. ‘*Dishwasher Love*. And, er, *Gas, Regulo Mark 11, Italian Style*.’

Mick inhaled deeply through his nostrils.

‘These romantic films, then,’ he said, ‘they’re big on cooking?’

‘And other things,’ said Florence, with a wink and just a hint of a leer.

She blew him a little kiss.

Mick wasn’t used to women being attracted to him. He found it particularly unnerving. Especially when the woman’s mentally unstable husband was sitting six feet away, sharpening castration equipment.

Thankfully, at that awkward, possibly perilous, moment, the 1940s, marquetry inlaid clock on the mantelpiece went ‘bong.’

‘Flagstone!’ cried Florence. ‘Time for the flares.’

Mick, who was still striving for polite conversation, was about to mumble something about preferring grey slacks, when Flagstone leapt to his feet, grabbed a box of matches and hurried off to the back door.

‘Flares for the strip,’ explained Mrs Flagstone.

Mick was still struggling. His mind began to fill with nauseating images of naked farmers running around doing unspeakable things with lighted matches, when Mrs Flagstone explained some more.

‘Flares for the *landing* strip. Whatever were you thinking, you naughty boy.’

She whacked his shoulder, playfully. There was a cloud of flour dust, a slight click that could’ve been a partial dislocation and his trilby went askew.

Mick set the hat straight and jammed it onto his head.

‘Shall we go and see?’ he said, standing up. ‘My job is to cover every aspect of her arrival.’

Outside, Flagstone already had four pink flares burning brightly. Descending rapidly in the distance, Mick could see the powerful lights on the front of what looked like a small plane.

Despite the conditions, the pilot made a perfect landing, and started to taxi round to where Mick and the Family Flagstone stood waiting.

‘Can I shoot ‘em?’ hissed Mr Flagstone, enthusiastically.

‘No,’ said Mrs Flagstone, ‘they’re our guests, and you *will* be nice - it’s please-and-thank-you time.’

‘Please, please, please can I shoot ‘em?’ said Flagstone.

His wife had obviously had enough of Flagstone’s homicidal proclivities, and waiting until tomorrow when the men from the secure facility would call to collect him was no longer an option. She turned away from Mick, and there was a dull thud in the dark. Flagstone dropped and lay quietly in a horizontal position, just like a Flagstone should. Florence grabbed him by his braces and dragged his body behind a couple of drums of fertiliser.

It was just in time. The plane turned and they were hit with a powerful white light. The engine died, and the pilot walked round and opened a small door to let the passengers out.

While they were getting themselves organised, he strolled over to Mrs Flagstone and handed her a banknote-shaped package.

‘It’s all there,’ he said. ‘Who’s this?’

‘This,’ said Mrs Flagstone, placing an unnecessarily wet kiss on Mick’s face, ‘is Mr Flagstone. He set up the flares.’

‘Flares were fucking terrible,’ said the pilot.

‘I know,’ said Mick, ‘I was there - ’72 to ’76 was a disaster.’

People were getting out of the plane.

And there she was. Zizi Stromboli.

She looked sensational. She was wearing a low-cut dress, which delivered a spectacular, panoramic view of her recent surgery. The lights from the plane were positioned perfectly. Mick pressed the remote in his pocket and fired off about twenty shots as she walked by. There were three other minders in the group but they stayed comfortably in the background.

Within seconds, she was gone. The plane lost no time in taking off, and Mick was left alone with Florence Flagstone, rapidly decaying flares and Mr Flagstone's unconscious body somewhere in the dark.

Florence moved closer to Mick, and whispered in his ear.

'Couldn't you stay for a little flare-light fumble?' Flagstone isn't much of a fumbler.'

Mick had a good idea that after the clout Flagstone had just taken, his fumbling days could well be over, for ever.

As you'd expect from someone with a reputation as the corporate video world's number one bull-shitter, backed up by his advanced degree in awkward situation avoidance, Mick's reply was syrupy smooth.

'So kind of you to offer, madam, and I am, indeed, honoured and flattered. But you see, my wife is waiting in the car. It's our wedding anniversary, and I've booked a romantic, candle-lit dinner for later this evening.'

Mrs Flagstone took it on all three chins.

'Ah well,' she sighed, 'perhaps next time you're passing.'

She leaned forward and gently squeezed Mick's crutch, leaving a gently squeezed, floury mark on his trousers to remind him of the occasion.

They walked back past the roaring fire and along the threadbare carpet with its eerily illuminated sacks of potatoes, without further incident. The syrup had worked.

But just as they reached the front door, Mick's bluff was called.

'Well,' said Mrs Flagstone, 'it's been very nice meeting you, as far as it went. But tell you what, as your wife's here, it'd be an honour to meet her.'

Mick was used to verbally heading people off at the pass, but he sensed Mrs Flagstone was in a different league. He'd no desire to experience the dawn chorus lying next to Mr Flagstone behind the fertiliser drums.

So before he could say something like, 'She's got rabies' or 'She might have chewed through her restraints' or 'Watch out for the projectile vomiting', Mrs Flagstone had arrived at the Traveller.

Jim wound down the window. He spoke to the silhouette in front of him.

'Where the fuck have you been? I've been freezing my taters off. The fucking heater's packed up again. Fuck me, even on your best fucking days, you're the most useless fucker on the fucking planet.'

Mrs Flagstone turned to Mick. Her blazing eyes demanded an explanation.

Mick paused for a second, then his client excuse skills regrouped rapidly and made a triumphant return, sort of.

'Sorry about the language, Mrs Flagstone,' he said calmly, 'she went to Roedean.'

24

Back at the *It's Alright He Won't Bite Urban Wolf Sanctuary*, Percy Spearmint was starting to think that a hundred thousand dollars for Twinkle's appearance in *Little Blood-Red McRiding Hood* was looking a bit on the thin side.

Cecil Beader was never off the phone, talking in a language he couldn't understand, American, heavily laced with film production jargon. It was giving him a headache. If the cash hadn't been in the bank, he'd had thought of jacking the whole thing in.

At first, Percy made a note of the terms - apple boxes, back-ins, C47s, crafties, day players, furnie blankets, gary colemans, hot points and juicers - but soon, he let it all flow over him and, more or less, said yes to everything. He thought it was strange that there was never any mention of cameras or film stars, or where or what exactly they were shooting, or whether they had to have special permissions. But making the film was Cecil's job. All Percy had to do was handle Twinkle.

And that was another problem.

Something was up with Twinkle. He just lay in his cage, whimpering gently, the epitome of melancholia. He was listless and, even more strangely, off his food. Normally, Twinkle would eat anything that contained blood, especially if it was wearing a school uniform or a Greenpeace t-shirt.

But now, Twinkle just curled up as though he didn't want to be a wolf any more. While it was a little bit heart-breaking for Percy to see an animal in such distress, it was even more heart-breaking to think about what would happen to his hundred thousand dollars when Twinkle arrived in Scotland and everyone realised Little Blood-Red McRiding Hood could kick the shit out of him with one leg tied behind her back.

Thinking more of his planned Barbadian holidays and the sexual payoffs from wining and dining Ethel, the barmaid from the *Dog and Gusset*, rather than of animal welfare, Percy arranged for a vet to visit.

When the vet arrived, he wasn't too keen to get into Twinkle's cage because, truth be told, on the local veterinarian jungle telegraph, word about the mega-wolf's deadly exploits had got around. However, the vet made a huge leap of faith, aided by two of Percy's quadruple brandies. He comforted himself with the fact that people tended to exaggerate stories, like that nonsense about the visiting tax inspector who tangled with Twinkle and needed to have a new rectum fitted.

There was, however, no doubt about it. The animal looked in a bad way, and he was a vet who could easily handle Rottweilers, pit bulls and people from council estates - so he decided to man-up, unlock the lock and enter Twinkle's domain.

Ten minutes later, the paramedics were loading his grey, bloodstained body into the back of an ambulance, taking care to include any bits that were hanging off. Percy looked in and assured the vet that the *It's Alright He Won't Bite Urban Wolf Sanctuary* had comprehensive insurance to cover this sort of eventuality.

Despite the halo brace, the splints on his legs and arms, and a heavy administration of morphine, the vet managed a professionally authoritative, if slightly slurred, response.

Namely, 'Fuck you.'

When Percy had waved goodbye to the ambulance, he went back into his kitchen and brewed himself a strong, nerve-steadying cocoa-brandy mix. It tasted good, and he needed it. Rescuing the vet from Twinkle's sudden revival had been a harrowing experience. He had had to use the nine-foot, high-voltage cattle prod, and unfortunately, during the melee had accidentally hit the vet a couple of times with a highly untargeted 500,000 volts.

Of course, the shock, although excruciatingly painful, was not fatal. This was because the amperage was only .0001 mA. Now, it is a truth universally acknowledged that the lethality of an electronic charge is calculated by multiplying the voltage by the amperage.

The vet wasn't prepared to reassure himself of this universally acknowledged truth by doing the in-cage maths on his iPhone calculator. Rather, he concentrated on grabbing the roof bars and lifting his knees and testicles up as far as he could, while screaming, 'Get the mad fucker off me!'

But, now, the vet thing was over, Percy began to relax. He stirred his cocoa mug with an artificial insemination pipette he'd just taken out of the dishwasher, and began to think positive thoughts.

Mainly, he thought about how Twinkle's return to form had re-secured his financial future and, hopefully, a significant amount of action with the *Dog and Gusset's* Ethel.

These pleasant daydreams were interrupted, by a phone call.

'It's Alright He Won't Bite Urban Wolf Sanctuary, how may we help you?' said Percy.

'Cut the crap,' said the voice on the other end. It was Cecil Beader.

'My contact in Norwood County, tells me your fucking wolf - our hundred thousand dollars, pre-paid investment - has gone all limp-dicked on us.'

'No, no,' said Percy. He blew in the end of his pipette and emptied a few cubic centimetres of cocoa-brandy mix back into his mug.

'He's just worked over the local vet, I mean serious like. I got some pictures on my iPhone. Leg muscle ripped through to the bone, couple of serious fractures, a dislocated hip and two fucking awful cattle prod burns. The paramedics reckoned three hundred stitches minimum - and he was only in the cage twenty seconds.'

Percy emailed the photographs, while Cecil waited nervously on the phone.

When the images arrived, his whole tone changed.

'Percy-baby, I'm *so* sorry, man. These little picis are music to my ears. You see, us film producer types have a sensitive disposition and we tend to worry a lot. You know, about this and that. I guess, my Norwood County guy, just got it wrong.'

Percy pushed home his advantage.

'Maybe your Norwood County bloke would like to come along and cosy up to Twinkle at feeding time. Might give him a better - you know like - perspective.'

Cecil chortled.

'From what you say, after the vet wipe-out thing, he wouldn't have any perspectives left! Keep on trucking Percy. Everything's cool State-side. This is going to be great. Speak soon.'

Percy put the phone down. He was back on track. At least, for a couple of seconds.

Unfortunately, he glanced out of the window, where he had a direct view of Twinkle in his cage. What a difference an emergency ambulance visit can make.

The beast was lying down, looking just as miserable as before. His body language was pathetic. He was whimpering again. His eyelids drooped and a general atmosphere of lethargy and despondency hung heavily in the air. Apart from the fresh blood on his muzzle and fangs, there wasn't the slightest indication that this animal had the ability to make worldwide cinema audience shit themselves in terror.

Percy sucked the dregs of his cocoa-brandy mix up through the insemination pipette and tried to think about how best to inject some new life into the situation.

25

‘Holy shit and shebang,’ cried Lew, ‘these are terrific!’ He held his iPhone with a reverence usually only observed at the High Altar in St Peter’s Basilica. He swiped through the photographs.

‘I mean, every one is a winner. I don’t think I’ve ever seen silicon implants look so spectacular! This is hot stuff and, as I said, being Zizi Stromboli, they’re worth a fortune!’

Behind the bar at the 3Ls, May Piow Wong turned to Arthur.

‘Look at Mr Mick. His face glowing. Last time it like that was after he drink bad batch of Chinese sherry. I remember was only chemicals, no sherry flavouring.’

‘Well, thank you, Lew,’ said Mick. ‘It was all down to the trilbycam and a bit of good luck with the lighting.’

‘Don’t be modest,’ said Lew. ‘I can see you’re born to it - *and* I believe it was a solo effort.’

‘Not really,’ said Mick, ‘we were both involved.’

‘Yeah,’ said Jim. ‘I waited in the car for ages.’

‘Time for a celebration,’ said Mick.

He walked to the bar and placed the order with Arthur. It was hard. A quadruple brandy for Lew and two Perrier waters for the dynamic duo. On the racks at the back of the bar, he caught a glimpse of *Nigerian Rémy Martin*, his favourite. God it was hard. He tried to spice things up by asking for double lemon slices in the Perriers, but it wasn’t the same.

Still, he and Jim had come a long way since the policeman discovered them slumbering in the skips. Since then, they’d done some worthwhile charity work, become successful paparazzi and invented a secret camera for a hat. Mick had lost some weight and Jim had had his teeth bashed in twice, as well as having his lips almost torn off his face and nearly been crippled for life by a randomly lobbed half-brick. On balance, he reckoned they were ahead, but only just.

Lew emailed the digital images from his iPhone direct to a contact in New York.

‘He’s a top agent and will syndicate them across the States. Then we split the proceeds three ways. OK with you guys?’

Mick and Jim nodded, with their eyes firmly fixed on Lew’s quadruple.

*

Back in the Implosion Productions office, they lay in their hammocks and discussed life’s temptations.

‘I don’t want to go back to how we were,’ said Jim. ‘You know, staggering pissed every night and starting the day with brain-crushing hangovers. We’ve proved, we can stay off the booze. All I think is that, once in a while, I’d like a little drink.’

‘Ah,’ said Mick, ‘but there’s the rub, mush - one little quadruple brandy and you could get back into the swing.’

‘I don’t see the problem,’ said Jim, ‘sometimes it’s better to be drunk.’

‘Like when?’

‘Like when Kitty van Husen’s bodyguard smacked me in the gob, or when I fell off that bench at Lemfield Aerodrome Departure Lounge - I mean that really hurt. But if I’d been pissed, I wouldn’t have felt a thing.’

‘Yeah,’ said Mick, ‘but if you’d been sober, you could’ve dodged the punch, and you’d have stayed sleeping on the bench.’

‘I was fucking sober when I got punched and fucking sober when I fell off the bench.’

Mick could see that this, like so many of their conversations, was going nowhere.

He was just about to change the subject by asking Jim who his favourite screen drunk was - his own preference was Dudley Moore in *Arthur* (1981) and he knew Jim’s was WC Fields in *My Little Chickadee* (1940). While he knew Dud played a drunk, WC never appeared as a drunk, he just had some great lines about drink. ‘Once, during Prohibition, I was forced to live for days on nothing but food and water.’

Mick knew this was the sort of thing that could keep them sparring happily for hours. But just as he was about to make his move, the phone rang.

Mick took the call. It was Percy Spearmint.

When the call was over Mick slid expertly from his hammock and switched on the coffee machine.

‘Twinkle’s poorly.’

‘Vicious, killer wolves do not get poorly,’ said Jim. ‘They get ill and hopefully kick whatever receptacle wolves kick.’

‘Come on,’ said Mick, ‘why are you taking that attitude?’

‘He gnawed two student helpers to fucking death, that’s what happened, and when the authorities find out, there will be enough shit flying to block out every sunbed in South London.’

‘Percy’s really upset. He thinks Twinkle and I bonded when we met, that night of the skip incident.’

‘Oh, so that’s bonding is it? Pissing up someone’s leg. I’ll try that next time I take a fancy to a woman in the 3Ls and want to get a bit of bonding on the go.’

‘Well, I’m going straight over.’

‘Please yourself,’ said Jim and he turned over in his hammock.

‘Dudley Moore made a better drunk than WC Fields,’ said Mick, and slammed the door shut before Jim could reply.

26

'You got any veterinary-ish experience?' said Percy to Mick, as they clutched their mugs of tea and stared out of the kitchen window at Twinkle as he lay sprawled on his sheet of corrugated iron.

Percy had originally tried lots of hay and even a couple of sheepskin rugs, but changing Twinkle's bedding had become so hazardous, he'd had to stop. You only had to miss once with the tranquiliser dart, and you were toast - blood-stained, 8-hours of surgery, titanium-plate-inserted, oxygen-tented, no visitors, nil by mouth, morphine-dripped toast.

'No, sorry mate,' replied Mick, replying to the question, 'I've got no experience with animals, except Polly the office parrot, and he spends most of his time telling me I'm a wanker.'

Mick leaned over and rubbed the grimy windowpane to get a better view.

'If you ask me, he looks well and truly fucked.'

'That's exactly what the vet said.'

'Maybe I'm more of a professional animal welfare assessor than I thought. Let's go and have a look at the poor bugger.'

They went outside.

Percy switched off the electrical power to the cage bars, and Mick knelt down.

'Hello, Twinkle,' he said, 'it's me, Mick.'

Immediately, Twinkle's ears pricked up. His pale-blue eyes flashed open. He stood upright, shook himself. Stretched a bit, wagged his tail, then trotted over to where Mick was crouching.

Percy instinctively reached for the cattle prod.

Twinkle pushed his muzzle, with its liberal covering of veterinarian blood, to the bars and started to lick through the gap.

To an audible intake of breath from Percy, Mick offered Twinkle the back of his hand. That was just what the wolf wanted. There were lots of licks, accompanied by gentle whimpering.

After a lifetime of avoiding violence or severe injury of any sort, Mick was surprised to hear himself say, 'I'm going in.'

Percy was speechless. Less than an hour ago, he'd been thrashing around in the cage with his cattle prod, desperately trying to remove a vet who was doing an excellent impression of being a corpse.

Mick turned the key in the padlock and slipped inside. Twinkle immediately jumped up, placed his front paws on Mick's shoulders and began giving his face a series of huge licks. Despite turning his head to get away from Twinkle's breath, Mick managed to say 'Good boy', and 'How you doin' mate?'

The weight of Twinkle's enthusiasm, pushed Mick over and he sat down heavily on a badly chewed crate that had recently contained a day's supply of raw liver.

Twinkle, nuzzled his head on Mick's lap and murmured contentedly. Outside the cage, still tightly gripping his cattle prod, Percy was amazed. He'd never seen Twinkle's head so near to a human groin without his jaws being full of gnarled genitalia.

And so it was that, virtually at the same time, and in a strange unspoken sort of way, Twinkle, Mick and Percy came to realise that there really was some sort of special, if not magical, if not fucking unbelievable, bond between Mick's shambling, portly form and the lean, keen killing machine. Twinkle was delighted, Mick was mightily relieved, but Percy was nothing short of ecstatic.

*

'Look, Michael, there's ten grand in it. A week or two in the bracing Scottish countryside, just, well, you know, just making sure Twinkle...'

'Doesn't rip any poor bastard to shreds,' interrupted Mick.

'No, no,' said Percy, pouring out another mug of tea, 'think of it being like Twinkle's friend, not his keeper. He looks up to you. You're probably the father figure he never had. You could be the role model he'll follow for the rest of his life. You'd be idolised by animal lovers throughout the world. I mean how long is it since that St Frances geezer kicked the bucket over in Assisi, the Pope might even...'

Mick put his hand on Percy's arm.

'No can do, my old mucker, much as I'd like to.'

'But *ten grand*?'

'Sorry Percy, but we're getting paid that per night snapping celebs, and anyway, being a professional, I can't break a contract.'

Percy sighed and stirred his tea with the insemination pipette.

'Sorry mate,' said Mick, again.

Percy looked down and blew some sad-looking bubbles into his tea,

Mick stood up. He walked over and took one last look out of the kitchen window.

Twinkle had gone back to languishing on his corrugated iron sheet. He lifted his head for a brief moment and looked up at Mick's face in the window. Then he sighed and gently dropped his head back onto his paws.

Mick turned away and headed for the door. Business was business, papping was papping, but he wasn't at all happy. In truth, if he'd had paws, he'd have gently dropped his head onto them, as well.

27

After Mick had left the *It's Alright, He Won't Bite Urban Wolf Sanctuary*, Percy wandered outside, sat on a stool next to Twinkle's cage and pondered. He already had a hundred thousand dollars in the bank. But what would happen if he didn't deliver on the Twinkle front?

What terrified him was that it was an *American* film company. And in America, he knew from watching films on the telly, they didn't mess around. From the *Godfather* to that *Terminator* stuff, he'd seen that they had lots of guns, and there was some amendment to something or other that said they could blow your brains out if they felt like it.

And bloody Mick, who could've solved the problem in an instant, had turned down ten grand, all for the chance to snap some poxy celebrities. There was no way he, or anyone else he knew, or anyone else he could con, could handle Twinkle and get him to perform on camera.

The only way he could get Twinkle to do anything was with the electric cattle prod. And that didn't involve him getting the beast to do anything constructive like walk over here at a medium pace, or pop your head out of the bushes and stare for ten seconds.

He only used the cattle prod if he, or someone else close at hand, was about to die. And he could imagine how his instrument of last resort would go down, particularly if there was a member of the World Wildlife Fund in the film crew. Mind you, if Twinkle had a go at *their* groin, they might well reconsider their ethical position on the cattle prod and think about going for an AK-47.

He saw it all spiralling out of control. There could be protesters, TV News, and a major prosecution for animal cruelty. And where was that lunatic Viceroy Smith, the *Manchester Gleaner's* top eco-journalist? Percy had phoned their office. Viceroy was away and totally un-contactable, working for a month on a 16-page pull-out, featuring Madagascan butterflies. He wouldn't be needing no cattle prods, there.

Percy put his head in his hands.

His mind was a blank.

There really was nowhere else to go.

However, this was not true. There *was* somewhere to go - namely, the cupboard underneath the knife and fork drawer in his kitchen. And there it was - partially hidden by a tea towel, next to his handy collection of insemination pipettes. The contract signed by Cecil Bader.

He took it out and immediately realised this was a bad move. Percy had enough trouble with American, and enough trouble with film jargon, but add in the American legal system's most convoluted sentence constructions, and he began to feel as suicidal as when he'd been sitting outside with Twinkle.

He threw the contract on the table. It was a hopeless situation.

His face took on a grim, almost funereal, expression, and did very well to maintain the look for about five minutes.

Then suddenly, the corpse threw off the coffin lid, sat bolt upright and gave the congregation a cheery wave.

An idea had arrived, huffing and puffing new life into his miserable predicament.

He had the cash in the bank! All he had to do was use some of it to hire a lawyer or a solicitor or whatever they were called. Percy, very wisely, kept as far away from the law as possible, so he wasn't too great on what things were called. A legal bloke could go through the contract and look for loopholes.

He didn't want to phone the *Manchester Gleaner* to ask for a name, as they might start nosing around and find out about the clandestine Twinkle deal.

Who would know a good legal person?

Sod it - he should've asked Mick before he left.

He took out the Implosion Productions business card and, despite the logo making his eyes water, he dialled the number.

'Hello, is Mick there?'

A woman's voice replied.

'No, I'm afraid not. This is Mrs Hathaway - I'm the cleaning lady.'

Percy was desperate. He twirled the insemination pipette nervously in his left hand.

'I don't suppose you know which solicitor they use?'

'Well, from my experience, if they get into legal trouble, they don't use a solicitor, they just run away.'

'Well, do *you* know anyone?'

There was a pause.

'Well, yes, as a matter of fact, I do.'

'Great,' said Percy.

Mrs Hathaway gave him the address and telephone number, and Percy wrote the information on the back of an insemination schedule.

'Oh yes,' said Mrs Hathaway, 'and there's a cut-out of one of his advertisements from the *Soho Post-Intelligencer* - that's a newspaper - hanging on the office wall. I'll fax that over to you. I'm afraid it's full of vulgarities, but, I've met him, and he's a really nice man.'

Percy said thank you and put the phone down. The fax arrived. Good, it was talking Percy language.

NO CASE TOO TRIVIAL *NO COMPLAINT TOO PUERILE*

He decided it would be no use calling his office. All he'd get was some snotty receptionist saying he could have a meeting, in a fortnight's time. No. This was urgent. This was about now. He decided that the best policy was to turn up on the doorstep and demand to be seen.

Cecil Beader might phone at any time and give him the start date for the shoot, and it might only be a few days away.

He called a cab.

While he was waiting for it to arrive, Cecil Beader phoned and gave him the start date for the shoot. It was only a few days away.

28

Percy paid the cab driver and looked up at the nameplate on the wall next to the solicitor's front door. It was a pretty flash affair. It looked as though it was made of brushed titanium. The precise, laser-etched words on the plate were even more amazing. It said *Digby Elton-John, Solicitor at Law. Hi y'all*.

It looked like this Solicitor at Law bloke would be pretty expensive, but given the uncomfortable state of Percy's mind and the comfortable state of his bank balance, that wasn't going to be a problem.

He pressed the doorbell and was surprised to hear the first few bars of the American Civil War song, *Dixie*.

A woman's voice came over the entryphone.

'Why don't y'all come on in now, and make sure it's hangin' loose?'

Percy had had enough of American voices, and it did occur to him to take a leaf out of Mick and Jim's book, and do a runner. But, against his better judgement, he pushed the door and it opened.

He walked into an environment that could only be called Hollywood-Baroque, but not by Percy, whose architectural vocabulary ran as far as words like cage and shed.

The carpet was fluffy, white and immaculate. There were three huge, crystal chandeliers, and everything else was gold and ornate - gold door handles, gold mirrors, gold leather sofas and gold curtains. Facing the entrance door, was a huge, gold desk with a gold-leather swivel chair.

But the most surprising thing in the whole room was sat behind the desk.

'How may my good self be of assistance to you, honey?'

She stood up. Percy's knees buckled.

The lady behind the desk was a six-foot, four-inch version of Dolly Parton. Apart from the statuesque, muscular figure, she had the lot. A white, buckskin, rhinestone-encrusted jacket, with fringes hanging off the arms, a short, white, leather skirt and knee-length, white-leather cowboy boots.

Percy hadn't been in many solicitors' offices, but he was pretty sure this wasn't normal.

She extended her extensively, bejewelled, sunbed-tanned hand.

'Surely a pleasure to meet with you.'

'Yeah,' stuttered Percy, 'my names, Percy, I'm looking for Digby Elton-John.'

'Well Sugar-bunny, you've come to the right place, but Mrs Wynetta Elton-John, here, is the best you're gonna get for the next ten minutes or so. Hang on while I turn the music down.'

She reduced the volume with an apologetic look.

Her accent was so drawn-out Texan, Percy was having difficulties understanding.

'I'm partial to a slice of Buddy Charleton pedal steel with my morning cup of Joe.'

Percy was stunned and rather sad. He'd no idea that the iconic midfield player in England's 1966 World Cup-winning team was also a country recording artist, still, once your playing days were over...

Wynetta sat down behind her desk and indicated Percy take a seat in a white-leather armchair with gold arms.

Then it hit him.

'I seen you. I seen you in the papers,' he said with as much excitement as he could muster. 'You're a singer.'

Wynetta smiled. 'Only part-time, Honey, only part-time.'

'So you've moved into this soliciting?'

'Hell no! I *married* into it. But I help my hubbykins, Digby, like with the interior environmental design and all. But it's a hell of a game-change from back in the States.'

Percy had picked up that Digby would be back in about ten minutes, but from what Wynetta had already said, it looked like a quick chat *might* be on the cards. Also, as an American, she might know about this amendment thingy and whether it really did give people the right to blow your brains out. So he did his best to make small talk.

'So what was your job in America?'

'I was an astronaut.'

A large, steel door, the size of a portcullis, slammed down between Percy's brain and the rest of the world.

His vision went, but he could still hear Wynetta talking, like through cotton wool.

'Yeah,' she continued, 'did six months in the International Space Station back in 2005.'

'But why would they want a country singer on the space station, I'd have thought they'd have had the wireless?' said Percy into the blackness.

'Hell, no, chitlin brains, I got picked 'cos I'm a fully qualified structural engineer.'

Percy's blackness got blacker.

This was doing his head in. The sooner this Digby solicitor bloke appeared, the better.

He struggled on.

'So, how did you get going in this structural engineering?'

'Well, seein' as we're kicking the cat round the cowshed, it all started in El Paso when I was about 12 years old. I was reading this book about the famous Tay Bridge Disaster in Scotland. You know 'bout that?'

Percy reckoned that if he said 'no', Wynetta would carry on with her story and use up lots of pre-Digby time. And anyway, he knew fuck all about the Tay Bridge disaster.

So 'no' it was.

'It weren't like no engineering book. More like about true-life drama stories with pictures.'

'Anyway, in 1879, this bridge collapsed when a train was going over. Ain't that terrible. And 75 poor souls perished.'

Percy looked surprised.

‘Shame on you!’ said Wynetta, ‘I would’ve thought you’d wised up on that, what with Scotland being in England...’

Percy was going to say something, but wisely thought better of it.

‘It’s your national heritage! I mean you got that shit-kickin’ poem by that William McGonagall guy. How did it go, now?’

*“For the stronger we our houses do build,
The less chance we have of being killed.”*

‘Ain’t that right purty!’

Percy nodded, in a way which gave the impression he knew what a ‘purty’ was.

‘Anyway, continued Wynetta, ‘the bridge was designed by a dude called *Sir* Thomas Bouch. But, show ‘nuff, this *Sir*, who should have known better, skimped on everythin’. Like he used lattice girders supported by iron piers, with cast-iron columns and wrought-iron cross-bracing. Jesus H! And the wind loading was just 20 pounds per square foot, where, nowadays, like y’all know, we’re looking at 56 pounds, minimum.’

Percy nodded. Everything was still black.

‘Y’know, I still feel for those 75 people. Truth be told, it should’ve been 77, as that night, this Scotch guy, Mr Rory McTavish – don’t you just love the name Rory, sounds like a lion – do they have lions in Scotland? Anyway, Rory was in a rowing boat below the bridge, with his sweetheart - pumping hot lead, as we say in Texas.’

‘Few years back, someone told me his death certificate said, “Mr McTavish was having sexual intercourse in a rowing boat, when he was hit by a steam train and five carriages.” Not many guys go out like that! Makes y’think don’t it?’

Percy tried to think, but was found he was unable to.

‘And that’s how I got into structural engineering, that and designing and building my own brassieres.’

Percy didn’t have to ask. Wynetta was now unstoppable.

‘I was a big girl at 12, and nothing from the local hardware store did the job. So I read more about the engineering systems on that Forth Bridge. Y’heard of that one?’

Percy nodded.

‘Seemed like it might do the trick. Support, strength, flexibility, y’know. ‘Course I had to scale everything down from the way the bridge was engineered. It wasn’t easy, I had to get round the fact that that stress in any support member is equal to the shear in the sections multiplied by the secant of the angle, which the member makes with the vertical. ‘Course, that’s ‘cos the inclined chord member takes up part of the shear. I went for a cantilever ‘cos, as I said, I’d a lot up top, and you need to carry the dead load to the support where it’s forced against by a moment and shear stress. ‘Course there was no need bring in the snow load coefficients.’

Dixie!

Percy had never been in a boxing match in his life, but he now knew, with absolute precision, the sweet relief described by the phrase, ‘saved by the bell.’

29

‘Come in, Honey.’

With the prospect of a solution to his legal problem, Percy’s vision made a miraculous recovery.

And there he stood, Digby Elton-John, Solicitor at Law.

Digby was not what Percy imagined.

He was wearing a multi-coloured, seersucker cotton suit, with flared trousers, in a bold plaid pattern in blue, yellow, red and green. His Paisley shirt was combined with a pink kipper tie and matching hank set. Without a doubt, it had escaped from the more forgettable end of the 1960s. All that was missing was an Afro haircut, but, as Digby had no hair, that was a non-starter. Not that Percy gave a toss. Here was a solicitor. A ray of hope. He couldn’t have cared less if he was wearing a barrel with red braces. He didn’t even care that a barrel with red braces would’ve been more appropriate.

Introductions over, Digby guided Percy over to a glass-walled office at the far end of the room. They went in and sat down. Wynetta went over to a piece of equipment that looked like a memento from her days on the space station, and started making coffee.

‘So,’ said Digby, ‘how may we help you?’

Percy explained the whole thing, and at the appropriate moment, slid the contract across the desk.

Digby started to read. But within seconds his mind wandered. He wasn’t used to having clients. Even though his new wife had spruced the place up, he was just as clientless as when his offices had been a dust-gathering dump.

His mind wandered back, even further, to that point when he’d arrived, through no fault of his own, at the Kennedy Space Centre in Florida. Wynetta, as an ex-astronaut, had been giving the crowd a guided tour. He felt a little out of place among the holidaymakers, with his rusty, red Harris Tweed jacket with its singed arms, missing buttons and grey trousers held up with a tie. But Wynetta had spotted him. And as the holidaymakers filed out, she cornered him.

‘You’re an English guy, right?’

‘Yes.’

‘And, I guess from your clothes, you’re eccentric, right?’

Digby was obsessed by the 1950s. All his clothes came from charity shops, and his hero was Dan Dare, international space adventurer, and leading character in the *Eagle* comic, so he said, ‘Yes, I suppose so.’

‘Well,’ said Wynetta. ‘I just *love* British eccentrics. You know - whacky, but with that dangerous madman feel. Like Eddie the Eagle or Tony Blair.’

Despite being stunned by Wynetta’s overbearing personality and physique, space travel was Digby’s thing, and here was a real-live astronaut. He agreed to go for a coffee in the exclusive Countdown Cafe.

Within a month, they were wed. But it wasn’t so much a marriage, as a take-over. She immediately started removing the ‘dis’ from his disorganised life. Sometimes, he thought it might be a bit too much. She’d embarked on a programme off bringing him forward

from the 1950s, a decade at a time. A bit like they bring divers up from the depths in stages to avoid getting the bends. Currently, thanks to Wynetta's fondness for retro clothes shops, he was floating aimlessly in the 1960s. Not that Percy, whose idea of sartorial elegance was to use some underarm deodorant, would have noticed.

'So what do you think, Professor?' said Percy.

Digby was just about to open his mouth, when Wynetta came in with the coffees.

She spoke to Percy.

'He looking after you good an'all?'

'Well, we...'

'I know,' interrupted Wynetta, 'boy's talk. I mean, he might be a little old-fashioned, but he has a great mind. When I met him, he couldn't have found his butt with a flashlight in each hand. Sharp as a mashed potato. But we're getting there, aren't we Diggy-babes. Even though he's putting up a bit of a fight. Here, honey, show him your tie.'

Digby stood up slowly and obediently.

His flared trousers were held up by a knotted tie. It had been an essential part of his 1950s look, and he only agreed to Wynetta's decade-by-decade improvement plan, if the tie remained, throughout.

'See, that necktie round his middle? Wow! That is British eccentricity by the swill bucket load. I mean, you know that's an MCC tie. I mean, shucks, I didn't even know Minnesota had a cricket team. In my own back yard, as well.'

'Y'know, he took me to one of those cricket match things at the Rhomboid.'

'Oval.'

'I stand corrected, honey-pie. At least I didn't say Deltoidal Icositetrahedron.'

'Could you follow the game?' asked Percy.

'Kinda' replied Wynetta. 'It was like, I woke up and it was all over. But they had nice pyjamas.'

Wynetta blew Digby a kiss and left.

'Well?' said Percy.

'You're stitched up.'

'I can't be.'

'You are. You *have* to take the wolf up to the film location in Scotland. There are no get-out clauses, no room for manoeuvre, nothing. If you don't show, man, you'll lose cosmic amounts of sliced bread.'

Wynetta was also involved in a futile attempt to bring Percy's vocabulary up to date - again, a decade at a time.

'That's it then.'

'I'm afraid so.'

'How much do I owe you?'

'Nothing,' said Digby, with a sigh, 'it's just *so* nice to have someone to talk to.'

30

When Mick arrived back from the *It's Alright, He Won't Bite Urban Wolf Sanctuary*, where he had told Percy, in no uncertain terms, that any wolf baby-sitting deal was off, there was a note from Mrs Hathaway, saying Percy had phoned.

But Mick had given his decision, and that was final. And, anyway, he was more worried about Jim. His colleague, friend and Perrier-drinking partner in crime looked in a worse state than Twinkle. His eyes had sunk into his head, his skin was deathly white and his jaw was trembling.

'What's up?' asked Mick as he hung his coat on the peg.

'Mrs Hathaway's had a whizz round with the old damp cloth, and the place looks brilliant.'

'He's shitting himself,' squawked Polly the Parrot.

'Are you?' asked Mick.

It had long been a debate in the Implosion Productions office as to whether Polly understood what was being said, or whether his extensive vocabulary of obscene phrases - taught to him by football louts at a bar in Lanzarote - were just spewed out at random, and just happened, occasionally, to coincide with what was being said.

'Shit, shitty, shit-shit, shit, shit, shit...' said Polly merrily, before Mick quickly brought the black cover down over his cage.

'It's Lew?' said Jim.

'What?'

'He's had a phone call?'

'Zizi Stromboli kicking off?'

'No *much* worse. He emailed me the photographs he sent to his New York agent. They've appeared in hundreds of newspapers, coast to coast - *and* on TV.'

Jim clicked his mouse, and one of the photographs flashed up on the screen.

'Looks fantastic!' said Mick, 'I mean, I wouldn't kick her out of my hammock.'

'No *look!* There - in the background.'

'That's her minders.'

'No it bloody well isn't!'

'OK, so, who are they?'

'Viscount Celtic...'

'I'm quivering with excitement already,' said Mick, turning away to make some coffees.

'And,' said Jim.

'Yes?'

'You won't believe it.'

'Won't I?'

‘It’s worth waiting for.’

‘I *am* waiting James, but you know what it’s like, you wait for half an hour, then five answers come along, one after the other.’

Mick was getting seriously pissed off. Even though he could verbose for England, he felt he’d just slipped into one of those film scripts, where the hero whispers to his buddy, ‘Just stand up and walk slowly towards me.’

And the buddy says, ‘What do you mean?’

Then the hero, who can see the 30-foot alligator sneaking up on his buddy, says, ‘Just do what I say.’

And the buddy says, ‘Why should I?’

And the hero says, ‘Look, *just do what I say*.’

So the buddy stands up, shrugs, and says, ‘Satisfied?’

Then the alligator strikes, the buddy shits himself, and they clatter off through the swamp in the nick of time.

Whereas in real life, you’d shout, ‘Alligator behind you, run like fuck!’

It was time for Jim to get into alligator-behind-you-run-like-fuck mode.

And, fortunately for Jim and his general wellbeing, he did.

‘The two guys in the background are Viscount Celtic, Lord of the Realm, and Vito Abbatelli - the infamous, American, organised crime boss. Lew’s New York agent has been getting threatening phone calls, and due, no doubt to a misplaced sense of duty, he gave Lew’s details to the complainants. Then Lew, no doubt, out a sheer fucking vindictiveness, gave ‘em our number. I’ve had a couple of calls, already - and it isn’t good.’

‘OK,’ said Mick, with just a slight tremble in his voice, ‘calm down and tell Uncle Micky all about it.’

He handed Jim a coffee.

‘Well,’ said Jim, sitting down on the sofa, ‘I guess Viscount Fuckwit and Al Capone Junior are up to something illegal - certainly something that means they don’t want to be seen together, specially not in the UK. And now, thanks to Papa Ratzy and your efforts with the Tribycam, the pics are all over the fucking press in the US, and soon, no doubt, all over the poxy UK media. And I can tell you three things. They don’t like it, they sound nasty and they want revenge. And the revenge bit is where you slide into the frame.’

‘Me?’

‘Yeah, you took the pics.’

‘Hang on a minute,’ said Mick, ‘why just me? From what you said to Lew, I thought you played a major role in the success of the operation by sitting in the Traveller and moaning about the bloody heating packing up. You can’t have it both ways.’

Jim knew Mick was right, so he quickly moved the conversation on.

‘The thing is only *one* of the phone calls sounded American. The other was very British upmarket - calm, cultured and perfectly enunciated - and that *really* put the shits up me.’

‘What did they say?’

‘The American-sounding one said they were going to nail our arses to the doors of Enrico Ginelli’s Ice Cream Parlour in Brewer Street.’

‘Don’t worry about that,’ said Mick. ‘It’ll take someone with balls the size of King Kong to do anything that damages the paintwork on Big Enrico’s front doors.’

Jim didn’t sound so convinced, but he ploughed on.

‘The posh guy said that he was spokesperson for a discreet group, and the photographs of Viscount Celtic had seriously compromised their plans. And that, unfortunately, steps would have to be taken to nullify the impact. They would be in touch in the next couple of days - but not to worry, it would be quick and we wouldn’t feel a thing.’

It might have been relaxing body language, or a spasm of terror, but Mick stretched out his arms and legs, then clasped his hands behind the back of his head.

‘Any other feedback from the New York agent?’

‘Yeah,’ said Jim, miserably, ‘everybody thinks her tits look great.’

31

The story broke the next day in the *Daily Mirror* under the headline, ‘*Ever felt a count, Viscount?*’ There was the photo of Zizi Stromboli and her assets, but with a white circle with an arrow identifying Viscount Celtic and Vito Abbatelli in the shadows.

Mick and Jim, only sweating slightly, took the lift, then headed for Romany’s hardware store, where they made a few purchases.

Back, outside the shop, Jim contacted Lew on his iPhone, while Mick stood around looking bored and sniffing his best Luddite sniffs.

‘He’s in,’ said Jim.

*

And it was true. Lew *was* in. And so was the dreadful smell Lew thought was so essential to the success of Papa Ratzy. Mick and Jim sat down opposite Lew’s desk and made a start by pulling out their recently purchased air-fresheners. Unfortunately, Jim had simply asked for four assorted air-fresheners. And sure enough, the young man behind the counter had complied. Whether it was a terrible mistake, discontinued stock, or a whacky new line, Jim had no way of knowing. All he knew was on the desk in front of him were four air fresheners, named, *Eau de Scrote*, *Beefeaters Bum*, *Halitosis XXX* and *Hooker’s Armpit*.

Fortunately, they were all sealed in those plastic packs that need a pair of pliers, a screwdriver, a serrated bread knife and a gullible, fully insured apprentice to open. Mick surmised it was the sort of packaging that sold particularly well to people who regularly phoned the Samaritans, as there was a 50 per cent chance you’d slit your wrists opening the stuff.

But, there was no chance to open anything. Within ten seconds of sitting down, the stench began to overwhelm. With his eyes fixed firmly on his own survival, Mick ran across the office, threw open the windows, stuck his head outside and filled his lungs.

Jim remained in his seat, rapidly losing consciousness.

Lew responded to these life-threatening situations by hitting a panic button on his desk, which turned the extraction system on full blast. The office atmosphere became just about bearable.

Mick left the window open, staggered back to the desk and sat down. Jim began to recognise shapes in the room. And the three of them panicked silently for 30 seconds, before Mick spoke.

‘Are we fucked?’

‘From the calls I’ve taken in the last 24 hours, I’d say we’re in deep.’

‘How deep?’

Well, you know those butt-ugly fish, like a spiky basketball with long, sharp teeth and lights dangling off their noses?’

‘Yeah.’

‘They’re about two miles above us.’

‘Christ!’

‘Not that I want to run any further with the fish analogy, but look at this.’

Lew pushed a small piece of paper across the desk. On it were the words, ‘All three of you. Little Lenny’s Jellied Eel Stall, Margate, 3pm, today.’

‘Apparently it’s on the foreshore, we can’t miss it, or, as the guy on the phone said, we’d better *not* miss it.’

‘Who phoned?’

‘No idea; just one of those guys who talks like that guy with the big ears.’

‘Obama?’

‘No, gimmi a break, Prince Charles - you gotta heard of *him*.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Good,’ said Lew, ‘we’re getting somewhere. I don’t like where we’re getting, but I don’t think we got a lot of choice.’

*

They took a black cab down to Margate. Lew paid in advance. It was a two-hour trip and, on the way, they looked at their options. That took around three minutes. The rest of the journey was filled with terrified looks, sweating, twitching and nail biting.

They were so absorbed in the crisis that Jim had forgotten to give Lew the present of the air fresheners. However, just as they hit the M2, near Rochester, against all the odds, the *Beefeaters Bum* and *Hooker’s Armpit* packs in his jacket pocket burst.

Focussing solely on the immediate environment, rather than the wider ecological issues, Jim immediately lobbed the packs out of the cab window. But the damage, certainly to Jim’s jacket, and the cabs interior space, was done. Everyone agreed, after a number of serious threats, that he sat on the other side of the cab to Mick and Lew, until the contamination had eased.

Fortunately for all of them, the cab driver was sealed off by a sliding glass panel and had no idea what was going on. He was built like a World War II ablutions block with no visible neck, and if he caught a mere whiff of *Beefeaters Bum*, they could see themselves being dumped head first onto the hard shoulder.

However, all went as well as could be as expected, even though none of them had expected to be fumigated by the deranged manifestations of some perverted perfumier’s art. Mick could imagine the deluded manufacturers sat round a boardroom table, or as he very much suspected, an upturned tea chest.

‘Gentlemen, my concept for *Eau de Scrote* is an indolent concoction of castoreum, and *stapelia gigantean* extract, with a nuance of benzoin. I see a tantalising aldehydic flourish in the top notes and an interesting interplay of Cashmeran musk at the lower reaches.’

When they arrived at Margate seafront and the driver opened the passenger door, his interpretation of the fragrance was much more direct.

‘Fucking hell. You bastards.’

Despite the driver’s vice like grip on Lew’s lapels, he did an excellent job of handling the negotiations and avoiding further violence, by making a generous cash contribution to both the costs of de-fumigating the cab and the driver’s upcoming family holiday in Marbella.

So, they'd arrived. It was cold and overcast, with a gentle east wind blowing in from Siberia.

And there was Little Lenny's Jellied Eel Stall. There was no one around, apart from an old tramp sat on a bench eating fish and chips out of a newspaper.

They walked up to Little Lenny's two-wheeled establishment, keeping Jim downwind. They were relieved to see that Lenny had branched out, so they ordered fish and chips and mugs of tea all round.

'No problem,' said Lenny. He turned to get the food from the heated shelf. Then he stopped, turned back and sniffed the air. He screwed up his face.

'Phew, bloody hell, now that *is* a first. Could be a dead whale further up the beach, or maybe something's gone bang at the local sewage farm. Hope it don't put you gents off your grub.'

'Absolutely not, Lenny,' said Mick handing over the cash.

'Actually,' said Lenny, 'it's not Lenny. Lenny died in 1972, I'm his grandson, Troy. But Little Troy's Jellied Eel Stall don't have the same ring.'

They agreed, but it was an agreement cut short.

The tramp began to whistle.

'Blimey,' said Troy, 'that brings back memories. That's the theme from *Straddle my Chainsaw* - one of my favourite films.'

Mick remembered the film being mentioned by Mrs Flagstone, and couldn't resist.

'Yes, one of Zizi Stromboli's earlier films, I believe.'

'Dead right,' said Troy. 'Eh, and did you see that picture of her on the front of the *Mirror* this morning. Bloody hell, what a pair, if you'll pardon my French.'

Mick, Jim and Lew didn't hear anything that needed pardoning.

They were all staring at the tramp.

32

‘Frightfully decent of you to slope on down here at such short notice,’ said the tramp.

Mick, Jim and Lew sat next to him on the bench and looked straight ahead, across the deserted beach and out to sea. This was Margate sea - lifeless, greasy and grey. It did not auger well.

‘Excuse the togs,’ said the tramp, ‘I’m normally a Lock’s bowler and Crombie man myself, but, as I’m sure you know, these are exceptional times.’

The tramp breathed in, purposefully.

‘By the way, what’s that whiff? Bally awful!’

‘We came down in a cab,’ said Mick, ‘upholstery was disgusting. Standards are slipping.’

‘Absolutely,’ said the tramp, ‘which segues me neatly into the predicament you three have created for yourselves.’

It didn’t, but all three reckoned it was best not to start arguing the toss over semantics.

The tramp stood up, walked over to a nearby litterbin and deposited his fish and chips. As he returned, they could see from his bearing, he’d been in the military. He sat down.

‘See chaps, it’s like this.’

All three of them turned and paid attention.

‘I’m here to save you from being murdered in the next 24 hours.’

All three of them leaned forward, and paid so much attention the veins stood out in their necks.

‘Of course,’ said the tramp, easing his head back and staring at the sky, ‘it may not be murder, it could be construed as manslaughter or, if we play our cards right, justifiable homicide - of course, to you, it’ll make no difference. You’ll be dead.’

He smiled at the clouds. No one else did.

‘I could bore for England on the elements that could come into play, *actus reus*, causation, foreseeability, malice aforethought, oblique aforethought and fascinating cases such as Regina v Hardbottle 1957.’

‘Er, I don’t wish to interrupt your flow,’ said Mick, ‘but is there any chance we could get back to that bit about saving us from being murdered?’

‘Apologies, dear boy,’ said the tramp, ‘twenty years before the bar, man and boy, you can never shake it off.’

‘We’re all ears.’

‘Well, I suppose the first thing you want to know is why someone, no names no pack drill, is wanting to dispose of you so quickly.’

There were three understandably pathetic nods.

‘It all dates back to that incident where you misguidedly took a photograph of one Zizi Stromboli, a cinematic actress, I believe. This photograph has been widely published by our American cousins and now here in the UK tabloids. Unfortunately...’

‘Viscount Celtic and Vito Abbatelli were lurking in the background,’ said Mick, ‘and the last thing you wanted to see was your boy cozying up to a mobster.’

‘That would be true - *if* it was true. But you mustn’t believe everything you read in the newspapers, Michael. It *is* Michael, isn’t it? The photograph in your file was a bit grainy - as you said, standards are slipping.’

‘Now certain of my colleagues believed that everything could be sorted with three bullets. And possibly a fourth for the Viscount’s Uncle Willie, who’s just got out of Parkhurst and acted as a go-between, setting up the meet.

But I talked them out of it. I’d had enough of bullets when I was in the SAS. And anyway, if you all suddenly got shot, journalists might start asking questions. Even though most of them are illiterate, bone-idle bastards.’

‘I persuaded my colleagues that all we needed was your commitment to believe what you read in the newspapers - from now on.’

‘What about Uncle Willie?’

‘I’ll have a private word with him too. He lunches at my club.’

At that point, the tramp took a copy of the local evening newspaper out from under his ragged coat. And there was the headline: *VISCOUNT CELTIC ALLEGATIONS QUASHED*.

Every newspaper and TV station in the UK and US has the same story. Shall I read?’

They all nodded.

‘A senior group of British politicians and civil servants has issued a joint statement that Viscount Celtic was, in fact, at a meeting in Whitehall, at the time he was supposed to have been photographed with American businessman Vito ‘Teflon’ Abbatelli - and so on and so on.’

‘But it *was* him,’ said Jim, ‘I saw the picture.’

‘Of course you did,’ said the tramp. ‘But now *we’re* in control of the media, you’re going to realise you made a mistake. Remember, I said I was here to save your lives. Well, that’s how it’s going to work. If anyone asks, you made a mistake, and then we can all forget the whole thing.’

They nodded.

‘What about the mobster,’ said Jim, ‘I mean, I had a nasty call from him, or one of his thugs.’

‘Alas, poor Vito, I knew him well,’ said the tramp.

He scratched his stubble and smiled.

‘He’s not as tough as he likes to make out, and anyway, who knows - if he gets a bit bolshie, we could make him disappear. We have people.’

‘So, we’re OK on the mobster front?’ said Mick.

‘Not entirely, Vito is a pussy cat, but he has an unfortunate habit of employing psychopaths with uncontrollable, homicidal tendencies. Loose cannons, if you like. It could take us a few weeks to, how shall I put it, neutralise their aspirations.’

‘With the *people* you have?’

‘Precisely.’

‘So, in the meantime, we’re still up for the chop?’

‘Well, yes, there could be a few professional assassination attempts - nothing too worrying. Vito’s shoddy little operation is just upset you took the picture and potentially exposed the deal they were going to set up with Viscount Celtic, but they’re very worried about what might happen to them if they cross *our* interests. After all, we’re a lot bigger, a lot cleverer, a lot more unpleasant *and* better shots.’

‘So it’s a fine balance. They probably don’t want to get involved any further, apart from removing you three. Italian family honour and all that.’

‘But?’

‘I suggest you lay low for a while. Take a trip, get away from the world, and just let us deal with the situation.’

He handed Mick a scrap of paper.

‘Here, this may be of help. The place is remote, and the lady who’ll be taking care of you, has no connections to - how shall I put it - our interests.’

‘Contact her and arrange a stay. A fortnight should do it. No one will know where you are. Could be very relaxing.’

‘Thank you,’ said Mick and the other two nodded.

‘I been thinking about one thing,’ said Jim. ‘Why is this Viscount Celtic so important to you and your - er - interests?’

‘Ah well,’ said the tramp, ‘you’ll be delighted to know that I’m authorised to give you an overview. As you may or may not know, Viscount Celtic is pretty dim, but articulate - Balliol and all that. He’s handsome, comes across well on television and has excellent connections. But most important of all, he’s totally strapped for cash and, consequently, *extremely* malleable. If he was paid enough, we could turn him into a reasonably effective corporation dustman, or whatever they’re called nowadays. But if we pull other strings, he could be moulded for power.’

‘So,’ said Mick, ‘you plan to get this Viscount into a senior government position and make hay.’

‘Not a senior position,’ said the tramp, ‘*the* senior position.’

‘You mean?’

‘Yes.’

‘Prime Minister?’

‘And soon.’

Mick, Jim and Lew sat in stunned silence.

‘But how?’ began Mick weakly.

‘My dear boy,’ said the tramp with a not-very-nice chuckle, ‘this is the UK in the 21st century, the land of disappearing ballot boxes, fraudulent postal voting, dodgy police investigations, iffy judges and don’t get me started on the bloody media. Do you think it’d be a problem to corral four or five hundred greedy, self-interested air-heads loafing around the lower house to vote the way you wanted? Neither did we. That is until your photograph hit the world stage, and we realised the press and TV would have a happy month or so dragging Viscount Celtic’s name through the mud.’

‘Oh,’ said Mick.

‘But don’t worry about the details. I’ve told you all you need to know. With the basic facts at your fingertips, you’re less likely to blurt out the truth by accident. And if you do, as I said, we have...’

‘People,’ they said in unison.

The tramp nodded seriously, before thanking them, again, for making the journey. He said goodbye and stood up.

‘Just remember chaps, a private goes when he has to, an officer goes when he *may*. Good show.’

And with that, he turned and walked away, leaving the trio more confused than ever. He took a path down to the beach, and, within minutes, was picked up by an unmarked helicopter.

Despite hearing that they wouldn’t be murdered in the next 24 hours, Mick, Jim and Lew were not happy with the ‘may be a few assassination attempts’ line. And as if that wasn’t bad enough, as the helicopter disappeared from view, they realised their fish, chips and tea had gone stone cold.

They turned to Little Lenny’s Jellied Eel Stall with the hope of a re-order, but everything was shut up, barred and bolted.

There was no doubt about it.

They were alone.

And in Margate, for fuck’s sake.

33

The night following Percy's meeting with Solicitor at Law, Digby Elton-John, had not been pleasant. He didn't sleep a wink. He just lay there and sweated. There was no way out of the contract, no chance of insurance and no way was he was going to be responsible for countless deaths, maimings and limb loss among the film crew.

Slasher movies? Twinkle would give them slasher movies! And what if he escaped into the surrounding countryside? And what if Cecil Bader wanted his money back? And what if Cecil Bader had friends with guns? It didn't bear thinking about. But that's all he did. And the sweating, trembling and general disorientation continued throughout the following day.

At around five o'clock in the evening, just as Percy's suicidal thoughts were beginning to peak, Mick was also having problems, though, admittedly, not quite so severe. He was trying to get a cab for the sorry band of three on Margate sea front.

Eventually, they phoned a cab company that hadn't shut down for the evening - be fair, it *was* Margate - and after Lew paid a considerable cash premium, they set off for the M2, London and Soho.

With transportation problems out of the way, Mick sat back in the cab, and his thoughts naturally turned to assassination attempts, and the scrap of paper the tramp had handed to him. It had a telephone number, an email address, and a scribbled location - Glencoe, in the wilds of Scotland.

After ten minutes of useless deliberation, an image popped into his mind. Well, it didn't actually pop - it exploded. The image featured a beautifully lit, correctly exposed shot of Twinkle looking happy and friendly, standing next to a young girl with primroses in her hair and a red cape, giving him a big hug.

That was it! Brilliant! He *would* take Twinkle to the shoot. Just like Percy wanted. He'd spend a fortnight lounging round some God-forsaken piece of Scotland. Ideally, this Glencoe place would be somewhere sat navs didn't work and compasses rotated, thanks to the lab boys at Faslane using the local swamp to offload depleted uranium from the Royal Navy's nuclear subs. Perfect!

And with Twinkle in residence, any hit man who valued his private parts would be well advised to stay away. And, of course, there was the ten grand Percy-bonus to warm the cockles of his wallet.

In reality, he knew he could be picked off with a sniper's rifle from anywhere, but it was, more or less, a terrific idea. He decided to pitch the better parts of the idea, minus the ten grand bit, to his fellow targets.

Jim was up for it. This was great news for Mick. The two of them being in the same place meant there was a 50-50 chance that any hit man would go for Jim. Strangely enough, this was exactly the thinking behind Jim's decision, with the obvious difference that he looked forward to the hit man flipping a coin and selecting Mick.

Lew said he planned to stay in the Papa Ratzky office, where he would take a leaf out of Mick and Jim's book, and set up a hammock, relying on the unspeakable stench to disable any hit man within seconds of them entering the room. He sounded confident, but, in truth, he felt as safe as the last cake at a children's party.

Plans agreed, Mick begrudgingly used Jim's iPhone to call Percy, although he made a great show of not knowing which button to press and when to slide things. At the fourth attempt, he got through.

'Percy, me old mate. It's Michael here! Hope all goes well with you this fine evening...'

He needn't have bothered laying it on thick.

Percy almost sobbed with joy when Mick told him he'd reversed his decision and began asking about the start date for the shoot.

'And look Percy, can you persuade the film director to shoot the film in the woods around Glencoe. Apparently, it's a terrific location.'

'Shouldn't be a problem,' said Percy. 'I don't think they give a toss. They were asking me where Scotland was. I'll give 'em a ring.'

Percy sounded very relieved and emotional. Just as anyone would when they found out they were a hundred thousand dollars better off.

'Look,' said Mick, 'if all this is too much to cope with at the moment, I understand. Fax the details over, and I'll get back to you when you're in a safer, more emotionally secure space.'

Mick ended the call and looked across at Jim.

'What a load of old bollocks,' he said, in the friendliest way possible, 'I'm only taking a fucking wolf away for a couple of weeks' holiday.'

However, when the ten-page Twinkle fax arrived, Mick began to think that a couple of weeks bunged up in Lew's putrid office might have been a better and healthier bet. Certainly, it would've been warmer.

34

Scotland was, to quote one of Mick's more publicly broadcastable metrological analyses was 'fuckin' freezing.' They knew it might be tough. It was a long way from the delights of Greek Street, but if it meant no hit men, it was worth being out of their comfort zone, at least, for a little while.

Cecil Beader had confirmed they would shoot the film in this Glencoe place, as long as Percy could guarantee it was in Scotland. And Percy, after a quick check in his atlas, gave his full assurance.

So, they got the plan underway. They picked Twinkle up at ten o'clock at night and slid him into the back of the Morris Traveller, complete with darkened windows and a high-tensile-strength protective grill running across the car at the back of the front seats, or as Jim kept saying, 'at the back of our necks.'

Twinkle seemed delighted with the accommodation. He had a nice, warm tartan blanket, some clean, sweet-smelling straw, soft music and some old pieces of scrap iron to chew on. He murmured contentedly to himself and dropped off to sleep.

Percy waved Mick, Jim and Twinkle goodbye.

There was no doubt about it - that Mick certainly had balls - at least, he did for the moment. And Percival Spearmint Esquire was a hundred thousand dollars richer. Quite a result. He went indoors, put on a clean pair of World Wildlife Fund-branded underpants and his best suit, before setting off to rendezvous with Ethel, the barmaid from the *Dog and Gusset*.

The next task for Mick and Jim was to get the journey over with. So far, it had gone like clockwork. Mick had spoken to the owner lady, given their names, paid by bank transfer and had been emailed a confirmation with very precise directions.

Despite the Morris's ability to hit 147 mph, both Mick and Jim reckoned, whichever of them was driving should keep to the speed limits. The thought of being stopped for speeding and the look on the officer's face when he opened the back doors and saw Twinkle, didn't bear thinking about. Particularly as, given Twinkle's form with people who weren't Mick, the police officer's face wouldn't be there for too long.

Of course, they all needed to go to the toilet, but Mick had bought a large harness on a lead, and Twinkle seemed happy to trot off into the undergrowth on the edge of the motorway car parks, whenever the call came.

It was five in the morning, when they got past Glasgow and onto the westbound A82. Mick put his foot down a bit. However, he soon took it off again as the Traveller screamed through small towns on the western shoreline of Loch Lomond. At high speed, the car was difficult to control and earsplittingly noisy, so much so that Twinkle began to howl, as though he was leading a pack of 2-litre, 147bhp Isuzu Piazza turbocharged engines in an attack on a garage mechanics' training academy.

The stone-grey dawn, however, came up without a sound, and after they'd passed Bridge of Orchy, the sat nav told them they were approaching Glencoe.

Eventually, they took a left turn off the main road, and headed south, down a wide valley - mainly bleak moorland, but with neat sections of forest. The track was rougher and more uncompromising than the landscape, and went on for about five miles,

sometimes taking a direct route to a ridge, before plummeting down to the valley floor in a series of hair-raising hairpin beds.

By now Mick and Jim were shot. But, even though they were metaphorically flicking their brains with their index fingers and making cerebral bluba-bluba-bluba noises, they were impressed by the magnificence of the building that was to be their HQ for the next two weeks. In fact, they stopped the car to get a good, bleary-eyed look.

About three hundred yards away, on a rocky outcrop with commanding views up and down the valley, stood the rugged outline of Quagmire Keep. In the bottom of the valley, a small lake stretched away into the morning mist.

‘Not very Quaggy, if you ask me,’ said Jim.

‘Maybe sea levels were higher in the old days, before global warming got going, or something?’

‘Still,’ said Jim, ‘it’s very impressive.’

‘Probably got loads of land as well,’ said Mick, ‘judging by that *Trespassers will be prosecuted* sign.’

Jim yawned, scratched his belly, then said, ‘Actually that wording is wrong. Because trespass is not a criminal offence, it’s a *civil* offence. It should read *Trespassers will be sued*.’

‘Well, well,’ said Mick, running his fingers across his stubble, ‘sandpaper my scrotum with a rusty peat shovel - the barrack-room shithouse has got a new lawyer.’

Jim ignored the remark as he’d heard it at least ten times before - on the journey up. But he *did* punch the air with as much celebratory excess as he could muster after a ten-hour drive accompanied by the pheromones emitted from Twinkle’s leg-pits, or whatever they were called.

Mick eased the Traveller into gear, and moved off slowly so as not to disturb the sleeping mega-wolf. They pulled up outside the front door, and there was no denying that Quagmire Keep was even more impressive, close up. It was also where the road ended - the end of the line, as some people might say.

Originally completed on 12th February 1692, Ezekiel Campbell and his family moved into what was a magnificent example of a Scottish fortified house of the early 17th century. Proudly, they named it Campbell Keep.

Following the Glencoe Massacre on the morning of the 13 February 1692, before the lunchtime porridge had hit the pewter bowls, the name was changed to Quagmire Keep. It was, obviously, nothing to do with rising sea levels - it was just as near as Ezekiel could get to Shit Keep, without offending the local clergy. Because ‘shit’ was what they were well and truly in.

Around 80 members of the McDonald clan died in the massacre, at the hands of troops led by the Campbells. Ezekiel had nothing to do with it. At the time, he was sorting through the 17th-century equivalent of tea chests, trying to find the kettle and putting up shelves in the bathroom.

Nevertheless, for centuries, the Campbells of Quagmire Keep had lived in fear of bloody reprisals, though nothing really horrific happened until the building of the Glencoe Visitors Centre in 1975.

The walls of Quagmire Keep were built, reassuringly, of granite. The lower windows were tiny and set high in the walls, while further up they were larger. At the very top,

some 60 feet in the air, was a row of castellations. Each corner featured a round tower with a slate-tiled conical roof. The whole mighty confection backed onto a garden area, which, in turn, merged into dense coniferous forest.

Mick and Jim got out and walked, a little unsteadily, to the small, iron-studded, oak door, which they correctly supposed was designed to stop people getting in. The wind ripped down the valley, and they shivered as the sun did a not very impressive job of breaking through the cloud cover. Mick tugged on a porcelain lavatory chain featuring the helpful word, *Pull*, in cobalt-blue Victorian script. He did not hear a little bell going-tinga-linga-ling inside. This wasn't surprising, as the walls were four foot thick, the kitchen was on the third floor and the brass bell, on its coiled spring, had been missing since 1953.

He pulled again.

There was a shout from above. He looked up and saw the silhouette of a woman waving, enthusiastically.

'Heard your Mozza, chaps! Keep your hands on 'em! Down in two ticks!'

They waited about four minutes, during which time, inspired by the lack of a bell, and the need to concentrate on something other than the fact they felt they were in the early stages of frostbite, they discussed Lon Chaney's performance in Universal's 1923 version of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, directed by Wallace Worsley. And yes, after Esmeralda gave the chained Quasimodo some water, the nose putty on his left cheek started coming loose.

Eventually, this riveting conversation was interrupted by the sound of enormous bolts being slammed back. The door opened. It didn't creak ominously, and there wasn't a cobweb, or hunchback in sight. Mick and Jim disengaged themselves from the delicious world of the silent era, and prepared themselves for normality. The idea of a move back to normality, as they would soon find out, was a little presumptive, or as they would later reflect, bordered on wild delusion.

35

‘Ahoy there, chaps,’ said the lady in tweed. ‘How are they hanging, this pleasant morn?’

Before Mick could work out how best to reply, Jim blurted out, ‘We got a wolf.’

‘I know, my darlings. Messers Barton and Chartwell. We spoke on the telephone.’

She stepped back.

‘Miss Melissa Dribble,’ she said, extending her hand.

‘Welcome to Quagmire Keep. And don’t worry, about the animal. I had a cage made by a little man in Cowdenbeath, delivered last night, 20.00 hours. Two strapping young fellows, dungarees, short sleeved t-shirts, glistening biceps and, from what furtive glances I could manage, jolly decent-sized packages. Super! Only thing is they’ve brought two cages, still, if men have glistening biceps and jolly decent-sized packages, who cares if they can count?’

‘But the cost?’

‘No problem, darling, super response from your jolly old production director in the US of A. International transfer, *toute de suite*.’

‘I expect you’d like some brekkers after such a long drive. Then we can get the old wolfy-beast into his new home.’

They followed her rather broad, tweed-covered bottom, up the highly polished stairs, which spiralled around the inside of the building, to the third-floor kitchen.

The kitchen cupboards were ancient pine, complemented by oak floorboards and an old pine table with six ladder-back chairs. A large, cream AGA glowed in the chimney breast.

They sat down. The frostbite began to recede. Miss Dribble opened the warming oven and took out two full English, or perhaps it was more polite to say two full Scottish, breakfasts, and placed them on the table.

‘Grab your tools, if you’ll pardon the expression, and tuck in.’

Mick and Jim, who’d been living off motorway service station sandwiches and salt and vinegar crisps for the last ten hours, were delighted.

‘Tea?’

She lifted a large aluminium kettle off the top plate of the AGA and poured the boiling water into a china teapot.

‘There we are,’ she said, ‘don’t you just love making tea? The way it shoots out of the jolly old spout, all hot and steaming. I know I do. Yummy!’

When you’re starving, a full English breakfast beats any concerns over a tsunami of posh sexual innuendo, every time. Not that, in Mick and Jim’s case, the two events had ever occurred simultaneously before.

Blissfully unperturbed, they tucked in.

Miss Dribble put on her gold *pinz nez* and disappeared. The kitchen fell silent, apart from the noise of animated mastication from the directors of Implosion Productions, and the sound of furious typing from the room below.

Just as the last puddles of tomato ketchup were being swept up by the last pieces of fried bread, Miss Dribble came back into the room, looking rather flushed.

‘Did you enjoy your breakfast?’ she asked.

‘Excellent,’ said Mick

‘Spiffing! That should stiffen your arteries! Actually, just had a thought-ette on that. Did you know that the average, healthy male gets 11 erections a day, not to mention four or five at night?’

She collected the plates.

‘Er, I think we ought to sort out Twinkle’s accommodation,’ said Mick, fervently hoping the statistics were incorrect.

He explained about the wolf who, he assured her, was contentedly chewing on bits of scrap iron in the Morris Traveller, but who would soon be starring in a major feature film.

‘How super! I know a freelance journalist, not in the Biblical sense, of course, but give it time. He covers point-to-point for *Horse and Hound*. Maybe he’ll do a little piece on it. Not sure the old rag does wolves. But, as I’ve said to him on many occasions, an insertion is an insertion.’

Mick stood up quickly, and headed off downstairs.

*

Twinkle was as good as gold as Mick slipped his harness on and led him from the Traveller round to his new cage in the garden area at the back of the Keep. It was very roomy, much bigger than his cage at the Norwood sanctuary, though he could see, immediately, that the padlocks would need upgrading. Mick doubted whether the ironmongers in Glencoe village would have the high-tensile, titanium-steel, military-grade versions Twinkle would need, but there’d be no harm in asking.

Miss Dribble had thoughtfully provided a couple of large steaks, and he laid them down gently, next to Twinkle’s pieces of scrap iron. Then he left the cage and closed the door.

Twinkle looked up at him with pleading eyes, and, ignoring the steaks, trotted across to the far end of his new home, flopped down, put his head on his paws and began to whine. Then he got up, trotted over to Mick for another plead, then back to his sleeping area for another whine.

Mick took the hint and made a mental note to ask the ironmonger if he sold rusty, corrugated iron sheets.

Mick’s final act was to go back to the Traveller to collect a sign. It was one he had prepared earlier, back at the office. He’d thought hard about the wording. His preference was for WELCOME TO TWINKLY-WINKLY’S HAPPY HOME, but after considerable soul-searching had decided on CERTAIN DEATH and a skull and cross bones motif. He sighed as he fixed it to the cage door.

Preferring to reduce his chances of being gnarled to death, Jim had spent this ‘Twinkle time’ back in the kitchen, doing nothing. When Mick walked back in, he was

carrying the bags that had been strapped to the Traveller's roof rack. He was looking as near to death as when his cement-dust-covered body had tipped out of the skip, post-Oscar ceremony.

Jim had obviously been taking a lot of incoming innuendo, insinuation and downright filth, and regarded Mick, even in this perilous physical state, as the cavalry staggering over the hill. He stood up and grabbed the bags.

'Could you show us to our room?' he said to Miss Dribble, 'we've had a long journey and it might be best if we unpacked and got a few hour's rest.'

Miss Dribble looked at Mick's pallid, wheezing form as it tried to steady itself on the kitchen table, and said, 'I quite understand, follow me.' Then added, thoughtfully, 'At your own pace.'

*

After a good sleep, shaves, showers and a change into rugged mountaineering-type gear, courtesy of Cold Mountain Kit on Tower Bridge Road, Mick and Jim were ready for action, or what, in their world passed for action - usually described by outside observers as 'nothing much'.

Mick suggested they went into Glencoe village and searched out some corrugated iron sheeting, padlocks and fresh hay for Twinkle.

'Does that mean you're cancelling picking up the Bollinger and *fois gras* from Harrods?' asked Jim. Mick took that as a 'Yes.'

As they drove back along the valley, they realised they were winding their way through a stunningly beautiful landscape - wild, bleak, but with its own brooding power. They were waxing almost lyrical, when it suddenly dawned on them that this open landscape would also make it easy for a hit man to get a clear bead on them from virtually anywhere. The fact that the hit man would have no way of knowing where they were should have been comforting, but it was overcome by a healthy dose of advanced paranoia.

When they stepped out of the Traveller in the centre of the village, the paranoia had set in, at least as far as Mick was concerned. Jim had managed to wind himself up into James Bond mode. He was rather disdainful as Mick pulled up the hood of his anorak and scuttled along from shop to shop, in a crouch position. That is until a car backfired, after which, they scuttled in unison.

Quality padlocks were out, so Mick bought five ordinary ones, and they located a large farming supplies centre, which sold corrugated iron sheets and hay. Finally, he bought a little bell to fix to Miss Dribble's antique, bell-less doorbell system. It was a thank you for Twinkle's steaks and the fact that he didn't want the director or members of the crew, hanging around outside the Keep waiting for someone to accidentally open the door. But all in all, it was a very successful outing, particularly as they hadn't got shot.

Back at Quagmire Keep, Mick and Jim let themselves in, and found that Miss Dribble was being the perfect host. She'd prepared a hot beef stew with crispy, homemade chips and green beans from the garden.

'Won't be a minute,' she said, 'sit at the table.'

She disappeared. There was the sound of more furious typing from the room below, this time accompanied by little moans. When she arrived, she laid out three plates and sat down with them to eat.

‘Not being nosey,’ she said, ‘but can I ask why you’re here? I mean two strapping fellows like yourselves with a wolf in tow - one could be forgiven for being curious.’

Mick explained more about the film, about how he was Twinkle’s handler and how he didn’t really know what Jim was doing here.

‘Oh, I’m sure we can find something to keep him occupied,’ said Miss Dribble, wriggling slightly in her chair, ‘call me Melissa by the way.’

The food was truly delicious. It made Mick and Jim realise that their normal diet of pork scratchings, Pot Noodles, Indian take-aways and frozen pizza, while cosmopolitan in nature, might not be the healthiest of options.

‘So tell me - *Melissa*,’ said Mick, waving a piece of meat around on the end of his fork, ‘what do you do to earn a crust?’

‘Oh! I produce these’

She pointed to the far end of the kitchen where there was a large pine bookcase, full of books.

‘Wow,’ said Jim, ‘that’s impressive. I was terrible at woodwork at school.’

‘No,’ said, Miss Dribble, ‘you lovely, little twerp - I write *books*.’

She stood up, walked over to the bookcase and selected a few volumes.

‘Here you are,’ she said, ‘romantic novels, mostly historical.’

She spread four books on the table for their inspection.

‘Gosh, that’s interesting,’ said Jim, without looking down.

For someone with absolutely no interest in books, and whose critical vocabulary ranged from ‘Ace’ to ‘Fucking useless’, Jim had just made a unique pronouncement. One that could have easily won an award for the Literary Understatement of the Year.

36

The titles spoke for themselves. *The Man in the Iron Basque, King Leer, Julius Seize Her and Me Tarzan, you Jane Austen.*

The cover photography spoke even more. All the men had bare, well-oiled torsos or see-through shirts, slashed to the navel. Considering their highly developed six-packs, there must have been some pretty good gyms around in medieval times.

The women were equally extraordinary. Elevated breasts, bursting out of tight, low-cut bodices, long hair, flashing eyes, red lips, and, Jim was willing to bet, impressive six-packs.

The men stared manfully into the middle distance, while the women pressed themselves against their finely honed frames, usually with one hand sliding, albeit for just a few inches, down the front of their trousers.

‘Very interesting,’ said Mick, avoiding the obvious, ‘I note that they’re all by different authors - I mean we’ve got Penny Trayshon, Fanny de Zyre, Alotta Bush and Fonda Cox.’

‘Nomes de plume’ darling, *Nomes de plum!* All little me. Just that ‘Edited by Melissa Dribble’ bit at the bottom holds them all together.’

‘How many have you written?’

‘Lost count, sweetheart. Knock out four or five a year. Sell like hot cakes. Twenty-three languages and all that, more chips?’

‘Yes, please,’ said Mick.

He then decided to turn on what could loosely be described as conversational charm.

‘I was wondering what a wealthy author like yourself was doing, taking in paying guests.’

Miss Dribble replied that she took in guests because, for the first few years after she inherited the Keep, she was very lonely. It turned out that she needed ‘paramours’ to help keep her blistering novel output going, or as she put it, with an unnecessary leer, to stimulate her creative juices. She confessed that, before guests started to arrive, her creative juices had run so dry, she’d started writing a *History of Canal Dredging in N.E. Scotland 1802-1857*.

But following the arrival of her first guest, or as Jim correctly supposed, victim, she changed the title of the dredging history to *How deep can you go down*, following which, the bodice of the lock-keeper’s daughter stayed almost permanently ripped.

Mick thought this was the right time to thank her for the food and make good his escape.

‘That was lovely, Melissa, but I think I’d better go and see if Twinkle is happy with his corrugated iron and hay - and I’ve got to fix extra padlocks.’

‘As you wish, fair heart, I’m sure James and I can keep each other entertained.’

Mick left hurriedly, after maliciously spurning Jim’s offer to help fit the locks. That’d teach the bastard to play dead at the Five Crowns Hotel helipad. Mick still had veins in his neck that he swore weren’t there before.

Miss Dribble sat on the kitchen table facing Jim, and slowly smoothed her tweed skirt down with the palms of her hands. She crossed her legs. Her support stockings made an intimidating swishing noise.

'Now James, you naughty boy, what jolly japes can we get up to while Michael is away fixing padlocks and all that malarkey.'

Jim thought fast.

'I'm a writer too. I've written a film script. Halle Berry and Robert de Niro like it. Maybe I could read a bit of it to you. It's called *Vampire Midwives*.'

'Oh no, darling! That sounds far too gruesome! Maybe I can read you one of mine.'

Jim sensed he'd just escaped something by the skin of his teeth, so he said, 'That would be nice.'

Miss Dribble stretched over and picked up one of her novels.

'Are you sitting comfortably?'

Jim nodded weakly.

'Nothing too tight around your bits?'

Jim nodded with his eyes.

'Then we'll begin.'

And that's just what she did.

'Consuela leaned on her hoe and watched the approaching horseman. Her day's work was done. The hot, Andalucian sun was less fierce now, caressing her voluptuous, young, bronzed body with its golden rays. She was still sweating.

Her flimsy, crimson, cotton dress clung to her curves. Her long dark hair was in ringlets, illuminated with gold. The honest sweat of her labours ran in a small rivulet between her firm, eager breasts, her pert nipples pushed through the cotton, her dress clung to her thighs.

She looked up. He was close now. He positioned his magnificent white stallion between her and the sun. The silhouette spoke. She knew it was Don José de Santa Testosterona del Mancunios Mourinho, her Lord and Master, owner of the 10,000 acre Santa Testosterona estate, and according to some of the local peasant girls, a sensational lover.

'My servants have been watching you. Jump up here.'

He offered his arm. She took it. She could feel the power in his muscles. He pulled her up onto the stallion, as if she weighed nothing at all. The horse reared up under his expert hands, and together they galloped back across the fields to the Palace Mourinho.

When they arrived at the Master's bedchamber, the servants had already prepared a huge, copper bath in front of a blazing log fire. Slowly he peeled off her flimsy dress and lifted her tenderly into the water. She looked up with wide eyes, half afraid and half excited. Her heart was pounding. Within seconds, he ripped off his clothes and stood proud and naked in front of her. His purple-headed manhood caught the rays of the dying sun. Conchita parted her beautiful lips, leaned towards him and...

'Er,' said Jim, interrupting, 'Don't suppose you got any more of them chips...'

Miss Dribble was not overly flattered.

'What do you think of the book?'

'Yeah, bangs along alright, doesn't it?'

Miss Dribble screwed up her face for a moment, then scraped the last of the food onto his plate.

She recovered within seconds, consoling herself with the thought that his inability to appreciate fine literature, and propensity to gorge himself on chips, did not affect her forthcoming plans in the slightest.

37

Miss Dribble had just suggested she sit on Jim's knee to read him the rest of the story, when he was saved by Mick's newly installed door bell.

Within seconds, Mick launched his devious personality through the open kitchen door.

'Hello there, folks. I'm glad to report that old Twinkle is doing just fine. Glencoe corrugated iron is apparently just as comfortable as Norwood corrugated iron - which is quite a relief.'

Jim experienced a sensation similar to that experience by Lieutenant General Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell, when Mafeking was relieved. He stood up, snaffled the last chip off his plate, then, breathing deeply, took Miss Dribble's books back to the bookcase.

'If it's OK with you,' said Mick, 'we'll be off to our room now, we have to get ready for the film crew arriving tomorrow.'

'Oh!' said Miss Dribble. She sounded rather disappointed, but recovered with, 'Perhaps we can meet for a few nibbles this evening, say eight o'clock. I may have some surprises for you.'

Unlike Jim, Mick did not see this sentence as a serious physical threat, so he said, 'Fine, that would be very nice, thank you.'

'Capital. Absolutely bang on!

*

Mick dropped back on his bed and watched the display with mild amusement.

'I tell you, she's fucking sex mad, the fucking books are full of sex, everything she says is aimed at sex, and I'm her fucking target.'

Jim paced the room, waving his arms and anxiously unburdened himself, to no avail whatsoever.

'You arrived just in time. She was making heavy advances. With the emphasis on heavy. I was one away from a groin grope.'

'Hers or yours?'

'Fucking hell, Michael.'

'I take it you're not physically attracted to the good lady?'

'Physically attracted? I've been more physically attracted to my own reflection.'

'Haven't we all?'

'I've seen better legs in a bucket of fried chicken.'

'Are you referring to Miss Dribble, or you?'

Jim turned, looked out of the narrow window, and gnawed industriously on his knuckles.

'Look, it'll only be for a couple of weeks,' said Mick. 'I'm sure a bright boy like you can come up with some evading tactics. You're nothing to do with the film, so you'll have plenty of time to get some ideas together.'

'No,' said Jim, 'I can't risk coming up with an excuse each day. I need everything planned out, right now. I need a guaranteed backlog. And you're going to have to help me.'

Mick stared at the ceiling. This was his idea of a fun afternoon.

'You could go for the biggy.'

'What?'

'Get cholera at four o'clock today. Quarantined for 14 days. After which, it miraculously clears up.'

'Fuck off.'

'You can trust me on all things medical, James. I played Dr Doolittle in the school musical.'

'Fuck off.'

'Did I ever tell you that repetition was one of your most endearing charms?'

'Fuck off.'

'OK. So you missed finishing school in Zurich. How about rolling up your trousers and sticking you leg through the bars of Twinkle's cage? Four seconds should buy you a fortnight in intensive care.'

'Fuck off.'

'No, think about it, James, it could be fun. You'd get a ride in an air ambulance, nice nurses and more morphine than you could shake a stick at.'

'If you're going to piss about.'

'OK, here's another. You could just go home, and I'd say you went for a walk and must have sunk into the bog.'

'There are no bogs.'

'OK, abducted by aliens.'

'Nope.'

'Washed out to sea?'

'This is crap, and anyway I've just come up with an idea.'

'Pray enlighten, my old delphinium.'

'I go to the shoot every day, and I'm so tired when I get back, I go straight to bed. So I'd never be left alone with her.'

'Then *I'd* become a target,' said Mick.

'We could both go to bed early.'

'Or we could tell her we're gay.'

'She'd look at us as a challenge. I tell you, she's hormonally supercharged.'

‘Come on,’ said, Mick, ‘she’s just a little country lass, who got lucky writing romantic novels with a bit of bodice ripping.’

‘Oh yeah, take a look at these.’

Jim tossed a couple of Miss Dribble’s novels onto his bed.

Mick picked them up.

They were.

15 inches (38.1 cm) is not enough by Rula Thumb

and *Spurt!* by Gloria Smess

‘Grabbed ‘em out of the bookcase. See what I mean?’

‘I think you underestimate her,’ said Mick, ‘it’s not just posh filth, she’s a canny business woman. *15 inches* is sponsored by the UK National Weights and Measures Regulation Office, and *Spurt!* is backed by the Laundry and Dry Cleaning Institute of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.’

Jim threw himself backwards on his bed in his well-practiced ‘life’s not bleedin’ fair’ mode.

Mick flipped through the pages and began to read. Over the next ten minutes, he released a flow of energised, if somewhat truncated, literary criticism.

‘Shit!’

‘Fuck no!’

‘That’s physically impossible!’

‘How many times!’

‘A greenhouse roof would *not* take the weight!’

‘With a sink plunger?’

‘Three in a barrel!’

‘What’s a tea-bag got to do with anything?’

‘The Jockey Club will do their conkers!’

‘See what I mean?’ said Jim, with a heady mix of gloat and worry.

Mick saw what he meant.

‘She’s either got an overactive gland somewhere, or a lot of experience - I mean that bit about the nuns’ beach volleyball team and the crew of HMS Valiant in Amsterdam - could she have just thought that up? And what about that orgy in the old folks home? Have you ever heard of see-through, PVC onesies!’

‘All I know,’ said Jim, ‘is she’s got the fully adaptable, you-can’t-bend-it, thermo-nuclear hots for me. And all I came up here for was peace, quiet and not to be assassinated - and that’s it!’

Creatively exhausted, they grabbed a few hours extra sleep. Halfway through their doze, Mick was woken by the sound of a truck pulling up, and some strange whirring and clinking noises. But he quickly decided it was just Jim snoring, and went back to sleep.

Eventually, they awoke properly and tidied themselves up.

But eight o'clock was looming, and, while they spent the early evening feverishly plotting and scheming on how best to avoid Miss Dribble's advances, nothing, absolutely nothing, could have prepared them for what was going to happen next.

38

Eight o'clock happened in the upstairs drawing room.

The coffee table was laid out with tacos, salsa dip, dhal puffs and Vietnamese grilled chicken lettuce parcels.

'Traditional Scottish fare,' said Mick with a friendly grin. 'Marvellous!'

Miss Dribble blushed slightly at the compliment, while still managing to eye Jim up and down.

Jim avoided her gaze, and looked around the room to check escape routes, or chests of drawers he could squeeze under.

They sat down in comfy armchairs with tapestry covers.

They were starving, and the food was delicious.

'Can I get you darling boys something to drink?'

'That would be great, two glasses of water please, and, if it's not too much trouble, a slice of lemon, in each.'

'Teetotal, then?'

'Well, yes,' said Mick.

He went on to explain that they'd previously enjoyed the occasional social drink, but decided that from a healthy lifestyle point of view, they'd go with water for the foreseeable future.

'That's super,' said Miss Dribble, 'I like my men to be fit as fiddles. But you know, you can never estimate how far the foreseeable future lies ahead, if you understand my meaning.'

Mick nodded, despite not understanding anything she was meaning.

Jim thought he'd be brave and join in.

'What's it like living here - you know - like in the shadow of Glencoe and the massacre and all that?'

He couldn't see how she could swing that round to sex.

And she didn't.

'I believe, in years gone by, the Campbells of Quagmire Keep were really worried and kept themselves to themselves. But gradually, it's just become a horrible part of history.

'But you're not a Campbell?'

'Chichester born and bred. But I *am* a Campbell. My mother was a Campbell and I married a Campbell in 1995. Dear old Robert. Unfortunately, he died on our wedding night. Still he was 93.'

Jim gulped.

'Dribble is my maiden name, not that I was ever a maiden for *too* long. You know what those Chi boys are like.'

She winked at Mick in a way that starting him worrying about whether she was recalibrating the co-ordinates of her target.

Miss Dribble stood up. Jim flinched. It was just a reflex action.

‘So, it’s water is it? Well, well, that’s a shame. You know you’re in Scotland - wee dram country, and all that?’

‘No thank you,’ said Mick, ‘water will be fine.’

‘Before I turn the tap, could I be a bit presumptive and show you something. It’s rather private and it’s not everyone I let have a peek.’

Both Mick and Jim thought this was it. They stood up and started to blather excuses about leaving.

Fortunately, Miss Dribble didn’t hear a thing. She’d turned and was heading out of the drawing room and down the stairs.

‘Follow me chaps, that’s the ticket. Keep up. Keep up.’

They went down past the kitchen, past her office, and ended up in the entrance hall.

‘We haven’t got coats,’ said Mick.

‘You won’t need them,’ said Miss Dribble, ‘we’re staying indoors.’

She pulled back a red, velvet curtain to reveal a small, gothic door. She inserted a large key and pushed it open. Inside, it was dark. They could just make out the start of a wooden staircase disappearing down into the blackness.

‘There are twenty steps. Count them, and you’re at the bottom.’

When they reached the bottom, they stood still. Miss Dribble joined them.

Mick and Jim’s minds raced as they waited for her to flick the switch.

Jim went for a dominatrix’s dungeon, like the one operating across the road from their office in Greek Street.

Mick went for the skeletons of all Miss Dribble’s ex-lovers sat facing them, in rocking chairs, like the end of *Psycho*.

They were both wrong.

Miss Dribble switched on the light, flung one arm out, theatrically, and gave a loud ‘Ta-dah!’

‘There we are, gentlemen! Sixty thousand bottles of *Glencoe Massacre* single malt whisky.’

The bottles were arranged on row after row of slatted wooden shelves, running from floor to ceiling. They sparkled and glistened like thousands of golden jewels. Mick and Jim were stunned. The largest number of alcoholic beverages they’d seen in one go were the depressingly dusty, collection of faded, look-a-like labels behind the bar at the 3L’s - *Booves Gin*, *Smirknoff*, *Southern Discomfort* and so on.

This looked like delivery day at the Bank of England bullion vaults. They couldn’t image 60,000 bottles of Perrier water having this sort of visual impact.

‘Impressive eh?’ said Miss Dribble, ‘Let’s head back upstairs and I’ll let you into a few more little secrets.’

As she turned to go, she picked up a couple of bottles from the nearest shelf.

‘Don’t look so worried, Water Babies, there’s some interesting historical facts on the back label.’

She switched off the light and, despite the darkness, both Mick and Jim knew that the end of their recently discussed future of permanent abstinence was now clearly in sight.

39

‘So,’ said Mick, helping himself to his third Vietnamese grilled chicken lettuce parcel, ‘what’s going on?’

Miss Dribble’s reply was somewhat oblique.

‘I’m pouring three glasses of *Glencoe Massacre* single malt. It’s only good manners to sample the host’s pride and joy. And I’ve a lot to be proud and joyful about.’

Another double-entrendred wink at Jim.

He countered with, ‘You said there were interesting facts on the back label.’

‘So I did. You remembered! Clever boy!’

‘Oh I don’t know,’ said Mick, ‘if I take him for a walk during the day, he has to spend the evening putting plasters on his knuckles.’

Miss Dribble was too focussed, and Jim too worried, to notice the remark.

Mick upped the ante.

‘He can’t find his dick in the dark.’

Again, no response.

‘Yes,’ said Miss Dribble, reading from the label, ‘*It was Renfrew Campbell who, in the 1850s, built the Glencoe Massacre production and storage facility at a secret location, namely, here.*’

‘And do you know what’s jolly interesting? To this day, neither Customs and Excise or the VAT people have managed to discover its whereabouts.’

‘But isn’t it illegal?’ said Jim.

‘You know,’ said Miss Dribble, ‘you have wonderfully tight buttocks. I don’t think of it as criminal all - I don’t need the money - it’s just a way of continuing a family tradition.’

Mick was stunned. He’d just been threatened with legal action for not including a packet of paper clips in his VAT return.

‘So nobody knows about your secret stash, below decks,’ said Jim, anxious to move the conversation away from his rear end.

‘Well, there are a few people - you know - who deliver materials and handle distribution - but they’re *so* well paid, they wouldn’t dream of spilling the jolly old beans.’

‘Why let *us* in on it?’

‘I sensed kindred spirits - if you’ll forgive the pun. And when you said you’d previously enjoyed the occasional social drink, there was a far-away, nostalgic look in your eyes. You licked your lips, and I think I detected the formation of a tear or two.’

Mick felt it was time to cut the crap. He grabbed his glass and raised it to Miss Dribble.

‘Full marks to Ima Goodlay, or whatever your latest *nom de plume* is.’

‘Dixie Normous.’

‘Close!’

They clinked their glasses together, and Mick drank the golden liquid down in one. He smacked his lips.

‘Hey, James, try it. It’s smooth but with an unexpected kick - like Perrier water laced with *Extract de Chernobyl*.’

Miss Dribble was encouraging.

‘Bottoms up, James! You have to learn to be a big boy, and it might as well be tonight!’

If only she’d known she was gently mocking James Redfern Chartwell, the Supreme Champion of the Drink 100 Yards of Ale competition at the Soho Weekend Beer Festival. James Redfern Chartwell who’d taken on Big Vera from the Argyll Arms, at Tequila Checkers.

That was a memorable night. Jim lost the game. But while holding her hands aloft in triumph, Big Vera keeled over and had to be treated with the 3L’s in-house stomach pump. Jim gallantly offered to do the pumping. After which, to huge cheers, he managed to stagger across to the bar, where he sank two quadruple brandies to get over the humiliation of defeat.

‘She cheated, every huffing move she made,’ he kept repeating. At least, that’s what he claimed he was saying, the following morning.

‘OK,’ said Jim, ‘bottoms up it is.’

‘You know,’ said Miss Dribble with a polite leer, that’s one of my favourite phrases, brings back so many happy memories.’

Mick decided to step in before things got out of hand on the sexual harassment front. And anyway, he was interested to know more about the million quid plus worth of up-market booze in the basement.

‘So, you have stills down there, as well?’

‘Oh yes, we have two vintage, Swiss alembic pots in a second chamber. And space for steeping, germination and drying - all that guff. Personally, I leave it all to Old Lob, charming name, what?’

‘Old Lob?’

‘Yes, been with me for years. Lives in the old forester’s cottage on the estate. He organises everything, including extra hands and barley deliveries. Never see the blighter. But he makes sure everything runs like clockwork. God knows what he tells people, probably slips free bottles to everyone at Christmas.’

‘It’s very good,’ said Mick, helping himself to a second glass.

‘It’s very, *very* good,’ said Jim, helping himself to a third glass.

‘Loosens the inhibitions too,’ said Miss Dribble, with a meaningful smile.

Jim panicked for a second and thought about pouring the contents of his glass back into the bottle, but decided it’d be a lot easier and less messy to tip it down his throat.

Mick carried on his small talk offensive.

‘Of course, you can’t produce vast quantities.’

‘Oh no,’ laughed Miss Dribble, ‘but at £40 a bottle with no tax and VAT, we don’t have to.’

‘What about water and heat exhaust - how do get away with that?’

‘Old Renfrew thought of everything. Victorian ingenuity. You noticed the supporting pillars of solid rock and the arched roof structure? Any hot air runs up through copper pipes in the walls. So we save on heating bills, too. Marvellous! Victoriana! The age of invention! The Great Exhibition! Steam trains! Prince Alberts! Super!’

Mick coughed slightly.

‘Surely, the Prince Albert was bit of a myth?’

Miss Dribble looked at Mick over her *pinx nez*.

‘Absolutely not, and I have the daguerreotypes to prove it. Fancy a butchers?’

‘No thank you,’ said Mick.

‘Frightened of the competition, eh!’

Miss Dribble helped herself to another large one, and laughed again. Actually, it was more like a strangled cackle. Despite the difficulty that must have been involved in making this noise, she managed to reach over and give Jim’s thigh a pat and an extended stroke.

Mick realised his small-talk gambit was reaching the end of its usefulness, and he was about to witness, something so gross and unappetising, he shuddered to think about it. Instead, he thought about having another quadruple. Which he did.

Suddenly, Miss Dribble went for it. She lurched over, threw her arms around the hapless Jim, and gave his cheek a big lick.

Jim had a flashback. It was to a beer mat he’d been reading during the tequila shoot out with Big Vera. The beer mat featured a quote from German philosopher. Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804) which Albert, the 3L’s barman, had bought cheap because of an unfortunate typo at the printer’s.

The quote went something like: ‘The spatial extent of the world and the finite parts of an infinite entity are, by definition, endless in number.’

Why Jim had this flashback will never be known.

Because his only response to Miss Dribble’s linguistic assault was to grunt, ‘Fuck me.’

Mick was also out of his depth. He could’ve said, ‘Please stop licking my friend’s face, or, the girls in the 3L’s pole dancing team call him Mr Floppy, or, I think I ought to go and get his flatulence medication. But after three quadruples, when he gazed at his desperate intervention slate, it was clean.

Then, just as he was mid-way through a frantic search for the chalk, he was saved - and poor Jim was consigned to his fate - by the call of the wildest.

40

Later, in less stressful moments, over a pint of sherry in the 3Ls, Jim would describe the noise that interrupted the complex social interactions taking place in Miss Dribble's drawing room, that evening.

'Imagine,' he would say, 'a World War II air-raid siren, pumped through a 200 watt Marshall Major with KTSS output valves and three ECC83 preamp valves - whipped through a hi-pass filter and racked up with an Ibanez TS808 Tube Screamer.'

Of course, no one could be bothered to listen, but it comforted Jim to analyse the acoustic technology, as it took his mind off what happened after Twinkle's howl punched a hole in the chilly Glencoe air.

Mick jumped up.

'Twinkle's in trouble!'

Miss Dribble, unperturbed by the ear-shattering decibel levels, continued to lick Jim's face and was starting to run her hand up and down his corduroy trousers.

Ignoring Jim's pleading, Mick poured his colleague another quadruple, and with a cheery 'good luck', grabbed the second bottle, and shot out of the door. On his way down the stairs, he had a few pangs of guilt, but not many. The bogus, body-dragging, do-I-call-a-resuscitation-unit event at the Five Crown's Hotel still rankled. Mick had decided that a good rankling was just what Jim deserved - and, based on Miss Dribble's enthusiastic demeanour and the excess saliva dripping off her tongue, that was exactly what he was going to get.

Mick pulled on his anorak, and stepped outside. The howling was even louder now. He popped round the corner, and there was Twinkle, muzzle to the moon.

'Hello Twink,' he said, 'how's tricks?'

The howling stopped. Twinkle padded to the bars, stood up on his hind legs and tried to lick Mick's face. He thought for a second about Miss Dribble's similar approach to personal relationships, but decided that that was for Jim to cope with. He was happy with Twinkle.

Mick got into the cage, and Twinkle skipped around him like a little puppy. Or as an outside observer might say, 'a fucking huge, 200-pound puppy with teeth that would make a velociraptor think twice about making eye contact.'

The thought of going back upstairs to whatever scenario had developed, filled Mick with dread. And as Twinkle obviously missed him, and there were stacks of fresh straw, and he'd snaffled the second bottle of *Glencoe M*, he decided to spend the night *Chez Twink*.

He bedded down, took a few warming swigs from the bottle, and closed his eyes. But, after a few minutes, Twinkle started whining quietly as though he wanted Mick to join him on the corrugated iron. Mick didn't budge. Twinkle had to learn there were limits.

*

Mick awoke in the morning to the smell of raw steak. Twinkle had brought him his breakfast and dropped it on his face.

'No thanks, Twink, old mate,' he mumbled, 'but nice thought, anyway.'

He stood up, wiped away the blood, dusted the straw off his anorak and tried to clear his head of his *Glencoe M* overindulgence.

‘Got to go now, Twink. Film crew, with lots of tasty arms and legs, coming today to make you a star.’

He crouched down, chuckled and ruffled the wolf’s fur. Twinkle nuzzled.

He doubted such a pleasant, friendly experience awaited him inside Quagmire Keep, where he suspected there had been, without doubt, a second Glencoe Massacre.

*

There is no record of an Erich von Stroheim look-a-like competition in Glencoe village, but if there had been one, Cecil Beader would’ve won hands down.

Not that Irma Crabapple, owner of the Ballachulish Bed and Breakfast establishment gave that fact a second thought. She was just certain he was a Grade-A nutter.

Film historians might concur with Irma’s opinion for, even in 1920’s Hollywood, the original Erich von Stroheim’s dress sense was regarded as a trifle suspect.

But Cecil Beader didn’t care. He was the owner and senior director of *Haemoglobin Productions*. He was convinced he was the world’s premier film director, and what he said went! In fact, he didn’t like von Stroheim. He’d once whipped through the YouTube version of his 1924 silent masterpiece, *Greed*, to check for any good ideas on sex and violence, but that was it. For Cecil, von Stroheim was all about looking like an arrogant, shit-nasty, genius of a film director. And he had it off to a tee.

Cecil had a shaved, bullet-shaped head, bulging neck, protruding ears, narrow eyes and a scarred forehead, which was good for a start. But he also had the monocle, cigarette holder, tight military-style jacket, jodhpurs, a heavy leather belt and brown-leather riding boots. To complete the picture, he carried a riding crop.

‘So, how long you staying?’ said Irma, from behind the reception desk.

Cecil adjusted his monocle.

‘Vee vill be stayink here vor two weeks,’ he replied.

‘Right oh, darlin’, no problem.’

‘I no like zis rite-o darlink, you shud more curtsey av ven addressink ze world’s numbver von director of ze film.’

He whipped out the no-limit credit card set up for him by Mac3.

Fortunately for Cecil, Percy Spearmint wasn’t up in Glencoe, otherwise the difference between his previously laid-back LA vowels and the stormtrooper-lite he was doling out to Irma, would have certainly raised a few awkward questions.

‘Uzza personz vil be arivink later - you haz rooms, here, ya?’

‘This time of year, no problem, ducks.’

‘Vat is zis about duks?’

Cecil whacked his riding crop against the side of his boot. It must have hurt.

‘I vish not to no about zis duk’s zing. I vish to know about ze people here cummen. Andt I vish to know *now!*’

There was another boot thwack.

Irma had had enough. She leaned forward, put her elbows on the desk and cupped her chin with one hand.

‘Hör auf, mich zu verwirren. Haben Sie die verdammten Zimmer wollen oder nicht?’

She knew her German night-classes at East London Polytechnic, would come in useful someday. And despite not knowing, for certain, if she’d translated ‘fuck’ correctly, the impact was immediate.

‘Sorry, what was that again, honey?’ said Cecil, leaning over to collect his credit card.

There was no need to answer.

Bluff called, Cecil went outside to get a good signal and, ignoring the strange stares from passers by, made a call.

Mick answered. He’d just left Twinkle and, as he climbed the stairs, he was aware of more furious typing coming from Miss Dribble’s office, but he sashayed past the door on tiptoe and arrived at the bedroom, just in time.

After poking the iPhone and sliding his fingers across the screen like he’d seen iPhone obsessives - otherwise known as normal users - do, Cecil’s call came through.

‘Hi Percy-baby, top of the morning to yooz, we’re here in the US of Scotland, Begorrah, I’m just off to buy a shillelagh, sure tiz. Whadda ya think of the accent?’

Mick was not in the mood.

‘Who *is* this?’

‘Cecil, Cecil Beader. Is this Percy?’

The penny started to drop.

‘No, no, my name’s Mick, Mick Barton. Percy sent me up here instead. He lent me his phone, said you’d be calling.’

Mick fumbled in his bedside table drawer to find Percy’s Twinkle fax.

Ignoring the corpse on the bed opposite, he scanned the fax for information, and fortunately found it.

‘So, you’re Cecil the director?’

‘Yeah! What about Twinkle?’

‘Don’t worry, he’s here.’

‘Still as nasty?’

‘Oh, yes.’

‘Great. As one of the world’s top directors, I have a busy schedule, but I reckon we ought to meet up. I got the crew already bedded down, and the actors slotted to arrive in a couple of days. So, we need to recce some sites. We could meet up in the *Copper Sporrán* tea rooms, whatever the fuck they are. They had tables and chairs, so that’s a start. Say eleven o’clock.’

Mick looked at the corpse.

‘Can we make that two o’clock, I might have to go to a funeral.’

‘No problem! Have a nice day!’

He was gone. Mick jabbed and slid the screen until it looked like the iPhone had stopped working, then turned to look at Jim.

He'd seen it all before, but never in the cold, uncompromising light of a Scottish morning. The grey skies seemed to bring out the fluorescent yellow tones in Jim's skin. His nose, normally bright-red, was now black and lumpy with gold veins, similar to those National Geographic films about solidifying lava. His eyes were wide open with a look of extreme terror - as though he'd just speed-dated a vampire.

There was no sign of rigor mortis, so Mick went into the kitchen where he noticed four empty *Glencoe M* bottles still on the table. The next floor down was Miss Dribble's office, where an old typewriter was going like a Lewis gun.

He went downstairs and popped his head round the door.

'Good morning, Miss Dribble.'

'Melissa, please.'

'Good morning, Melissa. How are you?'

'Absolutely spiffing. I haven't had so much fun since the school lads ten accidentally used the fire brigade display team's showers at the Chichester Gymkhana. By Jove! What a surprise we all got! Anyway, you were saying?'

'I'm worried about Jim.'

'No need to, he was marvellous - absolute good egg! Took about three bottles of *Glencoe M* to fire the blighter up, but after that - well, he certainly made this girl's heart flutter. I'm writing it all up into my latest - It's called *No lights. No Camera. Just Action.*'

'By?'

'Tess Tickles.'

'About Jim?'

'Yes?'

'He's shot his bolt.'

'Six times, if I remember correctly.'

Miss Dribble picked up a bottle of Tipp-Ex and used the little brush to make an adjustment to her manuscript.

'There we are - "six" not "sixteen" - wouldn't do to exaggerate!'

She gave a girlish giggle, which so unnerved Mick, he lost his grip on the door jam for a few seconds.

'Jim's got an important meeting in a couple of hours, but he's dead to the world.'

'Ah, what a chap needs is the Campbell Mega Pick-Me-Up. Been the family's best-kept secret for generations. Never fails. Everything you need is in the kitchen, second shelf.'

'What's the formula?'

'One third *Crème de Menthe*, one third Advocat and one third Cherry Brandy - stirred slowly for five seconds.'

'Sounds like a cocktail, what's it called?'

‘A Burst Boil!’

Miss Dribble let out one of her cackles.

‘You know my poor old ex, Robert, was telling me about it when he died. What a sweetie.’

She returned to typing up last night’s exploits with a face that was becoming more engorged by the second.

Mick retired to the kitchen, found the ingredients, made the drink and returned to Jim’s body.

He put his arm round his friend’s shoulders and heaved him into an upright position.

‘Not again,’ murmured Jim, feebly.

With reassurances that Mick would never ever let that nasty woman do things to his doo-dah, as long as he lived, he spooned the Burst Boil gently into Jim’s mouth.

Miss Dribble was right. Within five minutes, Jim was no longer fighting for breath and had identified the ceiling.

Within quarter of an hour, he’d managed to put his underpants on. Half an hour later, he was fully dressed in his anorak, corduroy trousers and stout fell-walking boots.

‘Right,’ said Mick, ‘how do you feel?’

‘Been there, seen it, done it, forgot it,’ he mumbled, while gazing intently at the wall.

‘Well, I’m pleased to see you live your life by such a dynamic philosophy.’

Mick was totally knackered by the effort of dressing the stupid sod, and as Jim seemed happy to watch the wall, he treated himself to a quick lie down on the bed. But not for long. There was business to be done. The *Copper Sporrán* was waiting. He sat up suddenly, swigged down the Burst Boil dregs, and began the hazardous task of leading Jim into the outside world.

They made it to the Traveller without incident, apart from Jim turning into a whimpering blob as they passed Miss Dribble’s office. So much for ‘forgot it.’

Meanwhile, in the *Copper Sporrán*, Cecil Beader was thinking. ‘Begorrah’ was an interesting Scotch word. It rhymed with ‘Sodom and Gomorrah.’ Combining the two would make a good movie title. His first stab was *Sodom and Begorrah* - like a Scotland sex movie with added blood. But that was for the future. Still, no harm in running it past Mac3 to earmark the finance. He gazed out at the drizzle and munched on his teacake. Then he shoved his riding crop down the inside of his boot and scratched his ankle. It was great to be a genius.

41

Ever mindful of their predicament, Mick zigzagged in a crouched position, across Glencoe High Street to reach the comparative safety of the *Copper Sporrán*. Jim had become unaware of the assassination threat, evidenced by the fact that he stopped in the middle of the road to wave to the traffic. Mick pushed on the door. It made a ping noise and Cecil Bader looked up.

He was sat on the right, at the front, next to the window. The rest of the clientele, mainly old ladies, sensibly, sat on the left at the back.

Mick realised Cecil was in director's-first-meet-with-crew mode. All smiles, happiness and cooperation. Tearing up scripts, kicking cameras, punching lighting technicians, having screaming fits if the bacon in their morning buttty wasn't crisp enough and introducing a vocabulary where 'fuck', 'arsehole' and 'dick features' were used as frequently as the definite and indefinite articles, was for later.

Jim lumbered through the door and realised he was in a room.

'Hi guys, glad you could make it, said Cecil.'

'I'm Mick Barton,' said Mick, holding out his hand.

Cecil shook it and looked across at Jim.

'And this is?'

'Recovering.'

'From what?'

'A literary night out.'

They sat down and Mick completed the introductions.

'He'll answer to the name Jim, in an hour or two. But, basically, he's here as reserve rations, in case we run out of food for Twinkle.'

Cecil stared blankly for a few seconds, then moved the conversation on.

'How's the hound from hell looking?'

'Fine. Fine. In fact, the reason I'm here in Glencoe is that Twinkle is always as good as gold when I'm around.'

'But, normally, he's still nasty as fuck?'

'Nastier.'

'Great,' said Cecil.

They ordered more tea and teacakes.

Cecil took out a list.

'Like I said, we've 48 hours to recce the whole movie.'

He read down the list.

'We need ten different forest scenes - could be the same area shot from different angles, the dumb asses will never know the difference as long the blood keeps spurting. Then we need a cottage, one for Little Blood-Red McRiding Hood and one for the

hunter. Again, same cottage, just changing the curtains is usually enough - maybe stick a few Playboy calendars up on the hunter's walls.'

'I heard Miss Dribble say there was a cottage in the woods,' said Mick.

'Great!' said Cecil. 'This Dribble babe, will she let me have it? Like, will she come across with the goods?'

'Oh,' said Mick, 'I don't think we could stop her.'

'I like that!'

Cecil gave his monocle an extra half-twist.

'Now we come to something really important where you two can come in useful. We need to find a lap-dancing club.'

'What!' said Mick. 'How the hell are you going to fit *that* into the script?'

'Who said anything about the script - it's post-shoot Rest and Recoup for the director and crew.'

'I don't think you'll find any lap-dancing clubs in Glencoe.'

'You're shitting me.'

'No, really, the nearest are probably in Glasgow. And that's miles away.'

'How far?'

'Ninety.'

'Hey, that's no problem! I know you're living on an island that's just a pimple on the world's asshole, but in the US, ninety miles is on your doorstep. So, you *sure* this Glasgow place definitely got a lap dancing club?'

'That and a *lot* more.'

Cecil's unnerving smile - a mixture of geographical certainty and lust - was interrupted by a ping from the door.

In walked a man in his mid-twenties. He was wearing a large, black, quilted jacket, with an American flag on the back.

'This,' said Cecil, 'is Jake, from Galveston, Texas.'

Jake nodded his blue nose in their direction, took off his wooly hat and gloves, and sat down.

'Is Jake part of the crew?' asked Mick.

Cecil laughed.

'Part of the crew! Part of the crew! Jake *is* the crew!'

'But,' said Mick.

'But nothing - this guy does camerawork, on-camera sound, lighting and even puts up the hospitality tent for the stars and the rest of us.'

'No trailers?'

'No.'

'No catering?'

'No.'

Mick took out a sheaf of papers from the zip pocket on the front of his anorak.

‘On Percy’s fax, it says you’ll have animal welfare monitors, top veterinary practitioners, plus a team of eco-gurus with substantive mandates and programmes for the sustainable use and conservation of the planet’s wildlife resources, to make sure everything is safe and humane.’

Cecil gnawed the end of his riding crop.

‘Ain’t you ever negotiated? Some parts of the offer get what I call virtual collateral damage. Anyway, Percy ain’t here. So tough titty! And, anyway, those experts cost a fortune, and they interfere. You think Twinkle needs any help from a graduate of the Faculty of Global Outreach at some shithole like Harvard. Get too close and he won’t have any hands to reach out with. No - we’re just a small version of a big happy family.’

‘Right,’ said Mick, though he wasn’t certain, at all.

At Implosion Productions, they thought they’d got cost cutting down to a fine art, but *this* was unbelievable. He also knew that cost cutting meant problems, sometimes very big problems, even on a ten-minute corporate.

He only had to think back to the repercussions they’d had over *How to play dead during a shark attack*, the low-cost video they’d made for Weymouth Corporation’s Holiday Welcome Pack.

He shuddered.

Without doubt, and with good reason, the shudder would prove to be well judged.

Still, it wasn’t all doom, gloom and anticipation of dread.

Looking on the positive side, they were being led by a world-class director, and Jim had successfully used a series of mumbles, grunts and limp hand signals to order another teacake.

42

Cecil arrived at Quagmire Keep in his Jeep, complete with a Zebra camouflage paint job as seen in *Serengeti Slaughterhouse*. The sight of his flamboyant clothing and dominant bearing impressed Miss Dribble. She immediately began to make long-term plans for a book with a 1920's Hollywood film-director hero. Lots of casting-couch action and flaunting of the Hays Code, plus the usual orgy scenes, which she knew she could cut and paste from similar passages in her other books.

However, these long-term plans were rapidly and dramatically overcome by short-term, supercharged sexual magnetism.

Cecil's strutting, monocled, riding-crop-waving demeanour instantly converted Miss Dribble from a tweedy, middle-aged writer of soft porn into an extended, full-bodied, muscle-spasm of weapons-grade lust. Mick fiddled around with the AGA, making tea, while she sat down, rigid and silent, staring at the wall.

As Mick passed Jim, with a silver tray full of fine-bone Wedgwood, he bent down and managed to whisper, 'You're off the hook, mate.'

Cecil and Jake were obviously concerned about Miss Dribble's impressive interpretation of an oak floorboard.

'Creative writer,' explained Mick. 'Swings from screaming extrovert to out like a light. She'll be alright in an hour or two.'

Apart from their worries about the appearance of Miss Dribble, Cecil and Jake were impressed with Quagmire Keep.

'This is one hell of an old place,' said Cecil. 'Must go back to, what? I guess 1945, or something close.'

Mick resisted the temptation to effuse about how the Atlee government had built over 500,000 of these homes in the rehousing drive after the War.

Instead, he decided to put Jim back to bed. As he tucked him in, his friend and colleague smiled weakly, and said, with a degree of quiet pride, 'I've been in a tea shop.'

Mick moved as close as he ever got to Florence Nightingale mode. He knelt down and whispered gently into Jim's ear.

'That's right, shit features, and I should've fucking left you there, you dozy bastard.'

Comforted by the response, Jim snuggled down and dropped off to sleep.

Mick went back into the kitchen.

'I suppose you'd like to see the star of the show?'

Cecil and Jake nodded and put down their cups.

Ignoring Miss Dribble's rigidity and hollow-eyed stare, Mick made a theatrical arm-waving gesture in the direction of the staircase.

'Gentlemen! Twinkle-o-rama awaits!'

*

'Don't look much,' drawled Jake, as Twinkle slumbered peacefully on his newly purchased sheet of corrugated iron.

‘Hat tip on the big, though,’ Jake continued, ‘but I can’t see no shit-your-pants terror thing. Still, I’ll get the camera from the car and pick up a few reference shots.’

Jake ambled off on his long Texan legs. Both Mick and Cecil stayed silent. They were wondering whether to give Jake a graphic, no-holds-barred, clinically precise description of the damage Twinkle had already inflicted on a wide and unsuspecting demographic, or to let him find out for himself.

Unfortunately for Jake, they decided on the latter.

Suddenly, there was a shrill call from high up the Keep. Miss Dribble had recovered from her temporary petrification and, with her hormone levels, no doubt, heading off the scale, was zeroing in on the unsuspecting Mr Beader. Ominously, she was waving a bottle of golden liquid, which lit up as it caught the flashes from her eyes.

‘Yoo-hoo! Jodhpur-boy, come up here. Dribbi-wibbi wants to talk with ikki-poops.’

Cecil was confused.

‘She talking Scotch, or what?’

Mick couldn’t be bothered to answer directly.

‘You’ll be fine,’ he lied.

Cecil, agreed, and reckoned he could turn the meeting to his advantage.

‘Some of the forests hereabouts would make great locations. And we could use that old cottage. Plus it’d be double cool plus if we could have this old place as a base. Save Jake from having to put the tent up every day. I’ll go and talk the old dame round. I got the feeling we could win bigly.’

‘I feel that too,’ said Mick, with a flagrant disregard for the fact that Cecil was about to crash horrifically out of his world-class-film-director comfort zone.

If Cecil was going to be pole-axed for 24 hours after an intimate rendezvous with Miss Dribble, Mick thought he might as well get Jim up and running. Especially as Cecil would be needing Jim’s bed for his recovery phase.

So, as part of his Jim-up-and-running plan, he decided to pop into town to get some Alka-Seltzers.

On his way to the Traveller, he passed Jake. An ‘Alright’ and a ‘Yo’ were exchanged. Jake was carrying a rather nice Sony PMW-55 videocamera.

Mick had admired the PMW-55 in the professional video shops around Soho. He’d brought home several brochures for bedtime reading, and knew the features by heart. Its CMOS sensor was capable of capturing true 4K (4096×2160) DCI-standard cinema images, thanks to 8.9 effective megapixels. It could also produce broadcast or feature film quality footage in 2K, in 16-bit RAW, enabling you to go up to 240FPS (with the optional AXS-R5 Recorder). While at 4K you could hit 60FPS. There was an impressive 14 stops of dynamic range with high sensitivity and very low noise. It also supported 4K output to a compatible monitor, through four 3G-SDI slots.

The only thing the brochures didn’t say was how effectively the PMW-55 dealt with copious amounts of blood.

43

Glencoe village was deserted. The wind was howling and the temperature dropping. For the first time, the *Copper Sporrán's* ping sounded inviting. There was no one at the tables. A pretty waitress came over and asked for his order. Mick went for a hot chocolate and a toasted teacake.

'Hm,' said the waitress, whose name was Penny, 'we must be popular, you were in earlier with the jodhpurs and monocle man.'

'That's right,' said Mick. 'Is it always this deserted?'

'No, it's just so cold. Everyone's staying home.'

She brought over the hot chocolate and teacake.

'Do you mind if I sit down for a quick chat? I'm new here and it's a bit lonely running the place by yourself, particularly when there aren't any customers.'

Considering his potential conversational companions were a sex-mad, old lady, a dead person called Jim, a slasher movie director who thought he was Erich von Stroheim, an American bloke with a better videocamera than he had and a man-eating wolf, Mick said 'Yes.'

She smiled and sat down opposite him.

'Funny, about no one coming in when it's cold,' she said.

Mick raised an eyebrow, so high it hurt. It was a move designed to create an air of cosmopolitan sophistication. He always tried to use it when he met a woman for the first time. Usually, their reaction was to reach for their pepper spray, or press the panic button if they were in a retail establishment.

Penny seemed to take no evasive action.

Mick used his index finger to drag his eyebrow down again.

'You'd have thought the name Copper Sporrán would be welcoming, you know, a warm place to shelter from the cold.'

Penny smiled.

'Interesting you should say that. The story is that, hundreds of years' ago, some local blacksmith actually invented a copper sporran to keep the highlanders warm when they were out on the glens.'

Mick, who was thinking about ways to break the eyebrow habit, misheard and thought the delightful Penny had said 'out on the glans' which he mistook for an old Scottish saying, like 'out on the piss', but with more intimate intent. As so often in these cases, he wisely chose to say nothing.

Penny continued.

'They'd fill their copper sporrans with hot coals.'

Mick winced.

'And it worked perfectly, as long as they walked slowly. But if they were attacked and had to run! Well, you can imagine – lots of things got set on fire.'

She smiled, as women tend to smile when they hear, or tell, stories about men damaging bits of themselves.

‘Just a piece of ancient history,’ she said, ‘or maybe just a load of old balls!’

She laughed. Mick tried to laugh as well. He managed to finish his teacake with a lot of thoughts he’d rather not have had.

He swallowed the rest of his hot chocolate, stood up and said goodbye.

Penny smiled sweetly, as well she might.

The tracker tag was in place.

*

When Mick arrived back from Glencoe with ten packets of full-strength Alka-Seltzer, he wondered if Jake might still be around. As soon as he got out of the Traveller, he became all too aware that he was.

The screams were horrendous. As were the snarls. Mick ran round to the back of the Keep and was greeted with a terrible sight.

Jake was hanging from the bars of the cage, top right, pulled up in a foetal position. He gripped the bars with his left hand, while his right hand used his Sony PMW-55 as a weapon to beat off Twinkle’s attacks. Obviously, prior to Mick arriving, Twinkle had scored a serious hit or two. Jake’s jeans hung down in bloodstained tatters and Twinkle’s muzzle was bright red.

The action was just a blur, a frenzied, violent, primeval onslaught, to the sound of snarls, barks and roaring. Jake’s cries alternated, confusingly, between ‘Help!’ and ‘Fuck off.’ Twinkle threw himself repeatedly at the little ball of Texan humanity clinging to the cage roof.

Mick ran over and crouched down by the cage.

‘Twinkle it’s me,’ he shouted.

Twinkle stopped, went over to Mick, licked his hand, wagged his tail, then resumed the attack on Jake with even greater ferocity.

Jake must have been hyper fit to hang on like that, or maybe a 500 per cent increase in adrenalin supply was helping. Mick ran round to the door and undid the padlocks. But the door opened inwards and Jake’s body was jamming it shut.

‘Hang on,’ shouted Mick above the roar of Twinkle’s attacks.

‘Fuck off,’ shouted Jake, again, as he shoved the lens of the PMW-55 into Twinkle’s blooded fangs.

Mick had an idea. It wasn’t much of an idea, but it was all he had. He ran to the Traveller, opened the back door and took out a can of Castrol 10W-30. As he ran back to the cage, the screams, obscenities, snarls and sound of teeth on iron bars and cameraman’s legs were reaching a crescendo. Mick opened the can and poured the oil over his tie.

Back at the cage, Jake was losing his grip. He was desperately fending off Twinkle’s blood lust, but Mick could see that, soon, it’d be all over. He ran up to the cage, flopped on his belly and flicked his oil-soaked tie through the bars.

‘Twinkle, mate, Twinkle! Remember this game?’

Twinkle did.

He dived over to Mick and began to playfully savage Mick's oil-soaked tie, just like that first night, outside the front door of the *It's Alright He Won't Bite Urban Wolf Sanctuary*.

'Get out,' shouted Mick. Jake did not need telling twice. Within seconds, he dropped to the floor and was out though the cage door in a flash.

'The key's in the padlock.'

Jake gave the key a turn and passed out.

Mick searched Jake's shredded, blood-splattered clothing for a mobile phone. He hit 999 and called an ambulance.

He made Jake as comfortable as he could, and put his coat over him.

The ambulance came and took the badly savaged cameraman to Belford Hospital in Fort William. Mick went with him, but not before he'd walked over to Twinkle and told him he was a very bad boy.

'Come on,' shouted the paramedic, 'we're running out of fucking morphine.'

Mick had one last thing to say to the wolf.

'How *could* you Twinkle? For Christ's sake, that was a Sony PMW-55.'

44

When Jim woke up, Mick was sitting by his bedside, sipping a modest glass of *Glencoe M*. His shirt and tie had been scrubbed with washing up liquid and were soaking in the sink, and he was having a quiet moment after the drama of the last few hours.

‘What’s going on?’ said Jim, propping himself up on one elbow. He scratched his head, and gave a massive yawn, which turned into an equally enormous belch.

‘Well,’ said Mick, ‘apart from your eructation drowning out Cecil’s cries for help...’

‘Eru, what?’

‘Eructation, my old brain cell, is the voiding of gas or small quantities of acidic fluid from the stomach through the mouth. Belching, you ignorant git.’

‘I don’t see what’s ignorant about not knowing that,’ countered Jim. ‘Bloody obscure, if you ask me. You’ve been reading *A Word a Fuckin’ Day* in *Readers’ Digest*.’

Mick was comforted. The stropky response showed Jim was on the mend after his Dribblesque-Glencoe Massacre experience.

He helped Jim out of bed and made sure he was dressed properly.

It was good to know that Jim was getting back to normal. It was also good to know that a bed was now available for the next patient, Cecil the Mad Monocle Man, whose strangled cries from Miss Dribble’s boudoir, indicated he would soon qualify for admission.

‘So what’s been going on?’ asked Jim, as they walked through into the kitchen.

It was obvious Jim was suffering, amongst his many disgusting afflictions, from serious information underload.

‘I’ll tell you,’ said Mick, ‘but not here.’

At that moment, Cecil screamed, ‘Lady, that horsewhip is *not* gonna fit!’

Jim shuddered and started having flashbacks, but managed a nod. They headed off, albeit a little unsteadily, down the stairs for a second date with destiny at the *Copper Sporran*.

*

They crossed the road, crouching and zigzagging, much as before. The door of the *Copper Sporran* pinged. The place was still empty, but warm. Penny took their jackets and their orders.

‘Usual?’

Jim smiled back at her - this was very cosy.

But his cosy feeling dissipated rapidly when Mick gave an overly graphic and unnecessarily extended description of Twinkle’s cage attack on Jake.

‘He’s in Intensive Care at the moment. The doc reckons surgery for the lacerations and ripped muscles, and, after that, he’ll be under observation for a week, at least.’

‘Poor bugger,’ said Jim, and munched sympathetically on his teacake. ‘But aren’t you worried about insurance claims?’

‘There was a sign on the door saying Danger,’ said Mick, confidently. ‘Jake unfortunately ignored the sign, and the inevitable happened.’

As the thought of a massive, ball-breaking insurance claim caused sweat levels to rise across his groin area, Mick moved rapidly on.

‘Thing is, he’s gonna survive, and that’s excellent. But there’s the little matter of the film?’

‘That’s not your problem,’ said Jim. ‘You’re only looking after the wolf.’

‘Yeah,’ said Mick, ‘but I feel a bit bad, you know with Twinkle ripping Jake’s arse off, and not bothering to stick it back on again - I’m concerned - I *am* a professional.’

‘I wouldn’t go so far as that,’ said Jim, with a chuckle. He bit into the teacake and melted butter shot out down the front of his shirt.

‘I think the Guild of British Camera Technicians is doing a new line in plastic bibs,’ said Mick. ‘Remind me to get you one when we’re back in Soho - gives you all the protection you need.’

‘Bollocks.’

‘No, it only comes down as far as your belly-button.’

Penny gave them the bill.

They ordered another round.

‘The thing is,’ said Mick, lowering his voice, ‘old Jake had a Sony PMW-55. I grabbed it when he fell.’

‘That was kind of you.’

‘It’s under my bed, now,’ said Mick, his technical lust overriding any trace of human empathy.

‘I’ve always fancied getting my podgies on it. Maybe when Cecil’s recovered and realised he’s in the doo-dos, he’ll think of hiring me *and* you to do camera and sound.

Jim looked unsure.

‘He hasn’t got long,’ enthused Mick, ‘the actors arrive tomorrow.’

‘How many?’

‘Two.’

‘Is that *all*, for a feature film!’

‘Look, James this is a slasher movie, they’ll be green-screening a wide range of scantily clad victims back in LA, and adding spurting blood and mega-splatters in post-production. The punters who watch these films are usually pissed, or off their face on replica designer drugs. They show them late-night, after the bars have shut. Honestly, if it was a 1930’s public information film about how to stop a nosebleed, they’d lap it up. All we have to do is get Twinkle running through the forest, looking nasty, few shots of Little Blood-Red McRiding Hood, some huntsman bloke, and a lot of blood curdling sounds, snarls, screams, and that’s it.’

Jim was tempted. He would be on the shoot, it could be interesting and there was an actress coming. She might be beautiful, and have a thing for skinny sound men. And he could honestly tell Miss Dribble, he was tired and unavailable each time he returned to the Keep.

They decided to give Cecil a few more hours under the relentless direction of Miss Dribble. They liked the idea of negotiating financial terms with a depleted megalomaniac.

As for Penny, she cheerily cleared away their cold hot chocolate mugs, buttery plates and general squalor. She didn't mind. It had been a good day. As someone once nearly said, 'One tag good. Two tags better.'

45

A chill, early morning wind was whipping in from the North Sea. It sliced through the granite city of Aberdeen, and swirled north, where it nearly shredded the windsock at Aberdeen Airport. It also whipped over the sleek form of the specially chartered cargo aircraft, and mercilessly underneath the flared nostrils of the young man standing outside the import warehouse.

The young man was pleased to see the arrival of the plane. But he wasn't used to this weather. He was used to the sun. A sun which had filled his being with passion; a passion for life, a passion for family honour, a passion for history, a passion for avoiding the restrictions laid out in the European Union Council Directive 91/477/EEC of 18 June 1991.

The crate was stamped Agricultural Equipment. The forged papers said Agricultural Equipment. And his brother's import-export forwarding company, now clear of the European Freight Forwarders Association investigation, had arranged pay-offs, which meant that anyone who mattered accepted it was agricultural equipment. So everything was officially in order.

The flatbed truck had an integral hydraulic crane, which only took a few seconds to heave the crate into position. Within minutes, it was fully secured, and the papers handed over for signature. The young man used a false name.

The driver leaned out of the truck window.

'Where to, pal?'

The young man got into the passenger seat and whispered to the driver.

Right oh!' said the driver, 'Glencoe it is.'

*

Miss Dribble did not regard her romantic interludes as needing skills usually associated with the management of an assembly line, but by the time Mick and Jim got back from the *Copper Sporrán*, she'd already tucked Cecil up in Jim's bed.

Mick and Jim chose not to go and look at him.

'Pheasant Pie?' she smiled.

Even though Mick and Jim were all teacaked out, they nodded, appreciatively. Back in the offices of Implosion Productions, food was usually something they found in their pockets after a night on the *Woomera 5-Star*.

Actually, it wasn't just pheasant pie. It was pheasant, leek and bacon pie, with hot mashed potato and buttered peas from the garden.

Miss Dribble's lustometer must have been in Regroup Mode, as she was fairly quiet on the obscene innuendo front.

Even the spotted dick pudding was comment-free, although the way she poured the custard was a bit suspect.

Mick and Jim had no shame, and simply pigged themselves.

It was difficult to tell how their nauseating eating habits affected Miss Dribble, but she stood in the kitchen doorway and announced that she had a dinner engagement.

'Got to run the old jalopy down to Glasgow to see my publisher, awful bore. Won't be back until late.'

And with that, she turned and disappeared down the stairs.

So, for the first time in ages, Mick and Jim had a bit of quality time together.

Mick lay back in his chair, opened the buttons on his shirt and released some of the pressure on his newly expanding stomach, while Jim absent-mindedly began flicking his remaining garden peas at the exposed belly button.

This example of extreme, executive bonding continued at a diminishing flick rate, for several hours.

It was, in fact, late afternoon, when Cecil burst out of the bedroom door, in full Erich von Stroheim gear. He strode into the kitchen, his monocle glinting with a mixture of lunacy and supreme confidence.

He slapped his riding crop onto his boots.

‘Only one thing to say, guys. I want you to know this, and know this *good*. Cecil Beader is back - and I mean B-A-C-K, back, and ready for action! Guess I was temporarily indisposed, what with being involved in strenuous negotiations with the good lady of the house. But now it’s full steam ahead on the film. I’ve got Jake pumped up, and I must have had 50 great script ideas while I was taking my power nap. You are, once again, gazing in adoration at one of the silver screen’s all-time greats who is - without doubt - ready to rock.’

During this speech, Cecil strutted around the table several times.

Mick felt it’d be better to postpone mentioning that he had his jodhpurs on back to front, and thought hard about when to break the *really* bad news.

As usual, when presented with delicate social situations, he chose to act in a way which an independent Bluntness Assessor could easily rate as A-plus.

Just as Cecil was about to launch into the ten greatest movies he’d nearly been asked to direct, Mick butted in.

‘Twinkle attacked Jake. He’s in intensive care.’

Cecil looked shocked.

‘*Who* is? Twinkle?’

‘No, Jake.’

‘Fuck me, guys, that’s nearly as bad.’

Cecil sat down. The bravura had gone.

He opened his mouth, but before he could show he was speechless, his mobile rang.

Mick thought he recognised the theme tune from *Deep Throat*, but correctly decided this wasn’t the right time to discuss the interesting, contrapuntal bass line.

It was a text.

Cecil’s face turned white.

‘Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit! Shity-Shit-Shit!’

‘Something wrong?’ asked Jim.

‘The talent’s ratted on the deal.’

‘What?’

‘The male and female leads. Some jerk in the office showed them pics of Twinkle, and the lily-livered bastards are backing out.’

Cecil looked down at his phone.

‘I quote. “If you think I’m going anywhere near that motherfuckin’ monster, you shit-faced jerk, you can go fuck a rattlesnake’s ass”.’

‘That’s disgusting.’

‘Yeah!’ said Cecil, ‘and the guy’s comments are even worse.’

Jim put his hand on Cecil’s shoulder, while Mick went off to the AGA, boiled up the kettle and bided his time.

Soon, Cecil was sobbing into his cup.

‘I got no cameraman, no sound, no fucking actors, just a wolf. Does he do anything else apart from handing out near-death experiences - I mean, maybe he does card tricks or downhill skiing, or the backing vocals for *Running Bear* - anything? I gotta have a film. You know what they call me in LA? The Deliverer. ‘Cos I always come up with the goods. In *Variety*, they have a regular column called *What the Fuck!* I’ll be a special feature. They say you’re only as good as your last picture. Well, how will mine be rated? Fuck-all times zero, with added zilch. Jeez, I’m finished.’

Cecil hung his head in his hands. His monocle plopped sadly into his tea.

Mick judged this was Cecil’s lowest ebb. A broken man seeing his career, reputation and ability to attract LA’s most glamorous women, or least the sort who hang around slasher movie offices, slither rapidly down the pan. It was time to strike.

‘You know, old bean,’ said Mick in his jolliest voice, ‘there’s a solution to all this.’

Cecil fished his monocle out of the Wedgwood with trembling fingers, and looked up. His eyes were the colour of cold tea.

‘By sheer good fortune, I happen to be a professional cameraman and Jim, here, is a professional sound recordist.’

‘Well, zip-a-dee-doo-dah, Miss Maybelline!’ said Cecil, with uncalled for sarcasm.

However, he could obviously see a chink of light at the end of this particular colonic passage, because, a few seconds later, he said, miserably, ‘But we got no camera.’

‘Modesty would normally permit me from mentioning this,’ said Mick, ‘but, during Twinkle’s attack on Jake, I managed, at great risk to my personal health and safety, to wrestle the Sony PMW-55 from Twinkle’s jaws.’

‘What the fuck’s a Sony PMW-55?’

‘It’s the name of the videocamera.’

‘Oh, yeah, *that* Sony PMW-55,’ said Cecil.

‘So we got video, sound and a wolf,’ said Mick, ‘plus a forest and Old Lob’s transgender cottage. Happier?’

Mick’s generous offer wasn’t really prompted by any feelings of goodwill towards Cecil or the production. It was just that two weeks of acting as a wolf-minder and coping with the repercussions of Jim’s boredom - sulks, inane arguments and groin scratching - was something he didn’t relish in the slightest. At least, operating camera and sound

would keep them occupied, and out of the reaches of Miss Dribble for a considerable part of each day.

Then things changed in a way Mick could never have foreseen.

Cecil looked up at him. Despite all the goodies Mick had just reeled off, there was a heart-rending desperation in his eyes.

‘What about the actors? We gotta have actors. Real actors. Right here. Without the actors, we got nothin’.’

Mick sensed the raw despair in Cecil’s voice, and it triggered his professional empathy mode. This was hidden deep in Mick’s psyche, and almost permanently blocked by his ‘I couldn’t give a toss, Bishop’ mode and his ‘Fuck all to do with me, John’ mode. But at that moment, energised by Cecil’s predicament, it broke through.

‘I suppose,’ Mick said, slowly, ‘one of *us* could play the huntsman.’

Jim made a face that, if Mick had bothered to look, made it clear that *he* was not playing a fucking huntsman.

And for once, James Redfern Chartwell was absolutely right.

‘Tell you what - *I’ll* do the huntsman,’ said Mick, ‘Jim can operate the camera for those bits.’

‘So all we need, now, is an actress?’ said Cecil.

‘Not true, my dear boy,’ said Mick, ‘not true. What we need, now, is someone to *play* an actress.’

There was a pause while cogs started to turn.

Mick and Cecil looked at Jim.

Jim turned his head round to see who they were looking at.

Then he turned his head back. The realisation took a couple of seconds.

‘Fuck no!’ he exploded. ‘There’s no way I’m going to tart myself up in some fucking red riding outfit or a diaphanous nightie and go prancing through the fucking forest making fucking daisy chains and singing *Whistle While You Fucking Work*.’

‘I take it you feel you have some residual motivational issues to resolve,’ said Mick, calmly.

‘Bollocks,’ said Jim, in the least theatrical voice he could muster.

‘Forget the dresses, the make-up, the wigs, the basket of wildflowers, the pink ballet shoes and all that crap. I’m off.’

He stormed out of the kitchen and stomped his way noisily down the stairs. From a James Bond wannabe to a daisy-picking drag queen in one go - absolutely no way!

Jim was unaware that, within five minutes, he would be back in the kitchen begging to be offered the part, while reassuring Mick that he could deliver an Oscar-winning performance in what would become the one of the cinematic triumphs of the century.

46

If it hadn't been for his shoelace, Jim's acting career, such as it wasn't, could have been woefully short.

He stomped out of the Keep and across the car park area, which was bounded on one side by a little line of fir trees. He'd just reached the trees, when he noticed his shoelace had come undone. He began thinking how manufacturing standards had fallen, worldwide, and even bloody shoelaces couldn't cope with a bit of stomping. He bent down.

As he grabbed the laces, somewhere, to his left, something cracked and immediately the bark of the nearest tree splintered and shattered. Crack, hiss, swoosh, and more bark splinters flew off and stabbed themselves into his hair.

Jim had never actually been shot at with a high-velocity assault rifle. Threatened, yes, but those women were all in the past. Now, he was in no doubt this was the real thing. Keeping his crouched position, he spun round, and before he'd chance to do anything embarrassing in his trousers, began a high-speed, zigzagging run back towards the Keep. There were more cracks, and jets of soil sprayed up around his feet.

When he got round to the door side of the Keep, the shots stopped. His breath was coming in huge painful gulps, and his chest, such as it was, felt like it was going to burst and treat the cold night air to a selection of partially digested pheasant, leek and bacon pie.

With trembling hands, he fumbled his key into the lock and fell into the security of the Keep's ancient, four-foot-thick granite walls. He leaned back on the door, panting desperately, then turned round and slammed the massive bolts into place.

After crawling back up the stairs, he arrived at the kitchen and stood in the doorway. He was still gasping for oxygen and was dripping with sweat.

Mick had opened a bottle of *Glencoe M* to celebrate negotiating a fee of £20,000 each for the filming and acting. Cecil had made a call to his US backer, and the money had been agreed.

Mick had been shocked how easily it had been. But he was rather more shocked by Jim's desperate appearance. However, it wasn't in his nature to express sympathy so rapidly, particularly when he always suspected signs of physical discomfort and stress could, usually, be put down to Jim's own sodding fault.

'I bin shot at,' gasped Jim.

Mick remained impassive. He hadn't forgotten the way Jim had just flounced out after refusing the generous offer to play Little Miss Blood-Red McRiding Hood.

'With bullets,' added Jim.

'I should've told you,' said Mick, casually, 'today is the first day of the open season on hissy-fitting sound men.'

'No, it was real, pyow, pyow, pyow!'

Mick noticed Jim's hand was trembling on the doorknob, but couldn't resist one more turn of the screw.

'What did you do?'

'I ran, crouched down and zigzagged like they did in that video, *Boy Scout to SAS Commando in Four Easy Stages*.'

'Not one of our finest,' said Mick to Cecil.

Jim walked unsteadily into the kitchen, slumped onto a chair and poured himself an exceptionally large *Glencoe M*.

'You did the right thing, old bean.'

Mick stretched back in his chair and gazed at the ceiling.

'I've never forgotten the advice of an old Royal Navy chum of mine. Apparently, if there was going to be a nuclear attack, they were ordered to run round and round the deck - because a moving target is more difficult to hit.'

The flounce had been paid for.

Mick leaned forward.

'You sure about all this?'

'Could've been someone shooting bison,' said Cecil, 'or whatever they got out here.'

Jim downed his second glass of *Glencoe M*. His hand had stopped shaking, and now had little more than a residual tremor.

For Mick, this had all been very entertaining. But suddenly, the horrible truth hit home. He whacked the rest of his whisky down his throat and, immediately, poured another.

He grabbed Jim's arm, stood him up and led him to the door of the bedroom.

En route, he turned to Cecil, 'Just a private chat between old friends, Jim has a wild imagination and a nervous disposition. Help yourself to the plonk.'

Cecil had no idea what a plonk was, so poured himself another glass of whisky.

Inside the bedroom, Mick lost no time in letting Jim know that he had a nervous disposition, as well.

'Fuck me, James, it's a hit man!' hissed Mick. 'The tramp's heavies must have missed one.'

'Or two,' added Jim, helpfully.

'That upper-class, am-dram fuckwit! Remember the Margate Monologue? "We're a lot bigger, a lot cleverer, a lot more unpleasant *and* better shots." *And* rubbishing that Italian mobster, what was his name? Vito Abbatelli?'

'His middle name was Teflon,' said Jim. 'Vito *Teflon* Abbatelli.'

'For fuck's sake, James, Teflon is the registered trade name of a non-slip coating they put on frying pans - when was the last time you were in a fucking kitchen?'

'About fifteen seconds ago,' said Jim. The *Glencoe M* was taking effect.

Mick made a valiant effort to pull the conversation round.

'That tramp bastard said Vito Abbatelli hired psychopathic hit men, and basically they sometimes got out of control. My guess is that one of them is so out of control he's sauntering up and down the wee glen out there, intent on blowing our bloody brains out. We gotta do something. This is a fucking nightmare.'

‘Glad you’re getting the idea,’ said Jim, ‘all that bollocks about running round the ship in the Navy, and that.’

Mick was unrepentant.

‘I mean, the minute we go outside, he’ll be waiting to have another crack at us.’

The awfulness of the situation was sinking in. They were trapped by wide-open spaces. The shooter had lots of forest to give him cover, and if he got chilly hanging around in the brisk Glencoe air, he could always pop into the *Copper Sporrán* for a quick bowl of tomato soup with croutons.

‘Let’s see if Cecil has any ideas.’

They opened the bedroom door.

Cecil had already had some ideas. As a result, he lay, slumped face down, on the table, an empty bottle of *Glencoe M* in his right hand.

They unscrewed his monocle and pushed a tea cloth under his head to make him more comfortable.

‘If Cecil wakes up tomorrow, I’ll take some time out to thank him for his input.’

The not-very-well-oiled cogs in Mick’s brain started to turn.

‘On second thoughts, I won’t say anything. I reckon it’s best if we don’t mention our predicament to anyone - and that includes the monocled masturbator, here, *and* Mary, Queen of Chichester. If they get scared, they could cancel everything and we could be forced out into the open.’

‘We *are* out in the fucking open,’ said Jim, ‘that bastard with the rifle could’ve been two miles away.’

Mick’s face looked dark and grim. They sat and looked at each other. They were not pleasant sights.

Then, after five minutes, the sun unexpectedly burst through on Mick’s face, and his nose returned to its normal state - red, bulbous and full of hope.

‘Well, *I’m* not going to be in the open,’ he said, ‘I’m going to be in a big wig and a big, false beard - plus I’ll have wellies and be carrying my trusty axe.’

It took a minute for the essential concept to sink in. Then Jim spoke, in a voice that reverberated with grim inevitability.

‘I could get on the internet, and order some pink ballet shoes.’

Mick leaned forward and patted Jim’s thigh.

‘That’s my girl,’ he said with a smile, ‘now why don’t we settle down, finish our drinks and discuss your motivation.’

47

Mick and Jim tried to make the next day as normal as possible. Miss Dribble had arrived back from Glasgow in the early hours, and was now ferociously typing away in her office. Mick had breakfast with a bleary-eyed Cecil, and reinforced the fact that they could handle the video and sound, and that Mick would play the hunter, and Jim would play Little Miss Blood-Red McRiding Hood.

‘Great,’ said Cecil, ‘why didn’t you use a thicker tea towel?’

Back in the 3Ls, Mick had once read something about the Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome on the back of one of Albert’s end-of-line beer mat purchases. It was about how high levels of alcohol interfere with neurogenesis, or the formation of new brain cells. In Cecil’s case, there must have been a queue of neurons a mile long waiting to be considered for admission.

Still, Cecil had decided that the best cure for a monster hangover was hyper activity - so after breakfast, he shot off to recce Old Lob’s woodland cottage and to tour Glencoe’s charity shops to buy clothes for the cast.

Mick said he’d stay behind and coach Jim on how to transform himself from a scrawny, unshaven, middle-aged degenerate with a huge range of disgusting habits, into a sweet, sixteen-year-old nymphet with cupid lips and fluttering eyelashes.

It’d be tough, but not as tough as popping outside and getting your head blown off.

Mick walked Cecil down to the front door, drew back the bolts and turned him loose into hitman land.

On the way back up the stairs, he passed Miss Dribble’s office.

Unfortunately, he didn’t pass it fast enough.

‘Ahoy there, Michael! Come in! Come in! Come in! How did you cope on your ownsomes - without the lovely Melissa’s charms to entertain you?’

‘Oh! Fine Miss Dribble, fine.’

‘Slip your firmly sculpted buttocks onto that chair, I need a bit of help.’

Mick didn’t recognise the description of his bum, but, nevertheless, he sat down.

‘As you’re aware, I went down to Glasgow last night, and you know, that disgusting little oik of a publisher started to criticise my work. I mean, 130 million sales and a free and for gratis monthly leg-over, and he still thinks he’s got the biggest tits in the class. Ridiculous!’

‘I’m afraid I don’t know much about writing,’ said Mick.

‘Ah, then you’ll be perfect,’ replied Miss Dribble.

‘The little creep, and I mean “little” in the biblical sense, thinks I need a third eye. How did he phrase it? “A bit of input from an alternative direction”, which sounds rather obscene to me.’

Mick didn’t move. He decided to go with the flow. There had been no sexual assault on his person, and that pheasant pie was fantastic.

‘When we were talking earlier, you said you’d been some sort of musician.’

‘Yes, a folk singer, actually.’

‘Never mind! At least, that must have given you a few erotic experiences - life on the road and all that. Come on spill the juice to Melissa, I can put it straight down into my novel.’

‘Er,’ said Mick, helpfully.

‘You can start now,’ said Miss Dribble, switching on a tape recorder. ‘Don’t be embarrassed. I’ve heard it all before. Probably done it too.’

Mick shuffled uneasily.

‘There was nothing to write home about, really.’

‘Oh, come on, a vigorous young man with supercharged hormones coursing round his lithe, firmly muscled body...’

Mick paused because he thought she’d started talking about someone else. But in the end, he knew he wouldn’t get away, until she’d got her recording.

‘OK, Melissa, how about *this*?’

He leaned forward.

‘When I went on the road, I used to hitchhike to gigs. It was considered cool.’

‘Of course it was,’ said Miss Dribble, patting him on the knee.

‘Anyway, one day, I had a gig up north, and, just outside London, I got picked up by a Royal Navy van with fifteen Wrens in the back.’

Miss Dribble typed with obvious approval, ‘One-five - Fif-teen, hmm! And?’

‘They said, if I had sex with each of them, they’d take me as far as Carlisle.’

‘Jolly decent of them, if you ask me. And did you?’

‘I finished the last one, the Petty Officer, just opposite W H Smiths in Carlisle High Street.’

She stopped typing, turned to Mick and clapped her hands.

‘Fabulous, well done that man! Good egg! And did it make you happy?’

‘Not really,’ said Mick, ‘the gig was in Birmingham.’

‘Are you sure that’s a true story?’

‘No,’ said Mick, ‘there were twenty!’

She laughed.

‘What a saucepot you are! Well, true or not, I’m going to slip it in, if you’ll pardon the expression.’

She typed away for half a minute.’

‘I never knew folk singing could be so exciting.’

‘Later on, I was in a rock band,’ said Mick, in a dismal attempt to ramp up his macho image.

‘Oh super,’ said Miss Dribble, ‘now we’re getting into more squelchy territory. Do tell one.’

‘Nothing much to tell,’ said Mick, ‘went to gig, set up, had pint, did gig, packed gear, got paid, went home. That was it.’

‘Well, that’s not going to set my readers’ pulses racing. There must have been girls in the audiences, gazing up lustily. Didn’t they at least throw their knickers on stage?’

‘No,’ said Mick.

He thought for a second.

‘Actually...’

‘Go on,’ said Miss Dribble.

‘We played to some Canadian students who were visiting a teacher training college, and a few of the girls threw their ice-hockey pants on stage.’

‘What? Those big, padded shorts that come down to the knee?’

‘Yes.’

‘And did that get your hormones raging?’

‘Not really, most of them threw their skates. We were two hours in A&E.’

Miss Dribble made a noise that sounded like laughter.

‘What a card you are!’

She didn’t type in the ice-hockey story, but used the pause to change tack.

‘Now, here’s something else, young man.’

Mick sighed. If only he’d been running faster when he went past the door.

‘Over pud, my publisher chappie started whinging on about how the first sentences of my novels weren’t memorable. And that that sort of thing was important, if I was to have a literary legacy. Cheeky blighter! Absolute oik, if you ask me.’

‘He was bellyaching on about Jane Bloody Austin, and how she bullies off with: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.” Most of my readers would’ve dropped asleep by the second verb.’

‘Or, that Daphne du Maurier person: “Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again,” etcetera, et-bally-cetera. Yawn! Yawn!’

Mick nodded.

‘So, I thought - I’ll show the jumped-up twerp. As soon as I was up and about this morning, I wrote some humdingery first lines for my next three books, and I’d like to know what you think. I want you to be absolutely truthful. Guides’ honour!’

‘OK,’ said Mick.

She picked up a sheet of paper, adjusted her *pinx nez* and read.

‘One: Xavier began nuzzling her nipples through the dishcloth that had so recently been used to wipe the spaghetti Bolognese pans.’

Mick tried not to let the wince show on his face. He thought of using one of his favourite one-liners. Would you like to talk about something more interesting like wallpapering the inside of a bucket? But as he sensed the end might be near, he decided to save it in case things got *really* desperate.

Miss Dribble continued.

‘Two: Lustily, Gaspard licked the vindaloo paste off the Venetian *Gros Point* lace frill on her black, PVC suspender belt.’

Mick tried a thoughtful nod, like they used to do on late-night-telly arts programmes.

‘And finally.’

‘Unexpectedly, Gregory’s erect penis burst through the Situations Vacant section of the newspaper she was reading.’

Mick moved over to his best ‘serious analysis’ expression - elbow on desk, fist under chin, slight frown, head at a quizzical angle. He looked a bit like Rodin’s *The Thinker* would have looked if he’d been sculpted sat on a toilet. Then he spoke.

‘Hmm! Just one question. Do these actions happen before, or after, the couple have been formally introduced?’

Miss Dribble looked at Mick over the top of her *pinx nez*.

She might be a batty, middle-aged, writer of dirty books, but she realised when someone, who knew nothing about what it took to become a multi-millionaire, was taking the piss.

Mick might be a clapped-out, con man and chancer, with a rapidly returning, teacake-driven weight problem, but he knew when his *Couldn’t-Give-A-Shit-o-Meter* was in the red zone.

The meeting of minds was skewed, brief, complex and, in all truth, unfathomable - but nevertheless, it happened.

She said, ‘I think you’d better be off now.’

And he said, ‘OK.’

Mick scuttled into the kitchen.

His animated entrance caused Jim to jump back from the AGA, where had been trying to curl some false eyelashes on the hot plate.

‘What took you so long?’

‘I’ve been to see Miss Dribble.’

Jim sat back on a chair and started to suck his thumb.

‘What happened?’

‘I’ve been dragged down to the depths, in a Sea of Scottish salaciousness.’

‘But she’s from Chichester.’

‘OK, a Chee of Chottish Chalaciouness, you pedantic bugger.’

‘Want a hot drink?’

‘What flavour? Burnt eyelash?’

‘Can we just park it?’ said Jim. ‘Let’s remember, we’re in this together. We’ll have a nice cup of tea, then you can give me a re-run of how to behave like a teenage girl.’

*

When Cecil got back from his hyperactive recce, he was ecstatic.

Mick stopped Jim’s lesson, just as he was learning how to bend forward and show off his cleavage. They both knew their chances of staying alive, depended on how well Cecil could procure their huntsman and Little Blood-Red McRiding Hood costumes, assuming he knew the difference. They sat down to listen.

‘I got all the clothes - second-hand, grossed out, but what the hell - it’ll make everything look more real.’

He dumped a large pile of stuff on the table.

He picked up a large piece of material.

‘Even a red cloak.’

‘Er - that’s green,’ said Jim.

‘Yeah, but they can fix anything in post-production. I least, I fucking hope so. If not, we’ll call it *Little Blood-Green McRiding Hood*.

He could tell by the look on Mick and Jim’s faces that he needed a little more than that.

‘Or how about *Little Green McRiding Blood*. Or *Blood-Red McRiding Hood Goes Green* - you know, like, appeal to the eco-warriors out there.’

‘I doubt whether our environmentally aware friends would be interested in slasher movies.’

‘You’d be surprised,’ said Cecil, ‘you’d be surprised.’

Mick and Jim looked a little dazed, so Cecil took the opportunity to change the subject.

‘Hey! And that Old Lob guy’s cottage is really cool - in a clearing, surrounded by wild flowers - real ones, none of your plastic trash. It has one of those groovy straw roofs. We can lose the satellite dish. Little windows with black criss-crosses on ‘em. I tell ya - it’s straight out of Glum’s Fairy Tales. And the forest! Shit! You’re gonna love it! Dark, dank, creepers hanging down, rotting ferns – and, get this - full of trees. Is that spooky or what! There’s pathways too, so we can offer a high visibility scenario, when Twinkle’s out on the prowl. It’s perfect! I can feel a very big one coming on.’

Fortunately, Miss Dribble wasn’t around to give them her opinion of that final sentence.

Mick decided it was time to get straight to a very important point, in a roundabout sort of way.

‘I can see you’re excited, Cecil, it must be wonderful to be a director at the top of his powers, all five senses razor sharp and on overdrive - sight, touch, smell, taste and hearing. Speaking of which, when you were out and about, you didn’t hear anything go bang, did you?’

‘Bang?’

‘Yes.’

‘What sort bang we talking about?’

‘Well, you know, a normal sort of bang - like, just taking a random example, the bang you get when someone fires a .338 Lapua Magnum sniper rifle, from a couple of miles away.’

Wikipedia can be useful, sometimes.

‘Hell no!’ said Cecil. ‘I’d know the sound of a .338 Lapua Magnum, anywhere. I got five at home. Fantastic! When we take the Hummer out for a little old barbecue over at Velasquez Rocks, we always take the Lapuas with a couple of thousand rounds of ammo. Great times, I tell ya. Sometimes, we invite some bikini model girls we got on the books, and video them squirting off a couple of hundred rounds. Make great inserts, in the movies, you know, just drop a 10-second clip in, if you think the audience might be getting gore-bored.’

‘Or sometimes, we organise a family fun day out in the desert. We let the kids have a go on that new visitor facility - *Snipers R Us*. You should see the little tykes whacking away - amazing. Like, a Lapua has a muzzle velocity of 3,000 fps and range around 2000 yards, and they’re right up for it. Bouncing around. Spraying every which way. You should see ‘em go. Who needs Action Man!’

Cecil noticed the looks of incredulous horror on Mick and Jim’s faces, so he decided to soften the image.

‘Couse, we act responsibly, like, we don’t let anyone under seven have a pop.’

Mick and Jim consoled themselves with the news that, Cecil had proved there was no one out there in Glencoe and District who was taking pot shots at anything that moved. They also consoled themselves with the fact that, as a professional hit man, he’d know what he was looking for. And if all he saw was a bearded huntsman type, sporting an axe and a full head of hair, not to mention a sweet, immaculately shaven, ballet-shoed nymphet, things would stay that way, until the tramp’s people caught up with him and did whatever it was they do.

‘So,’ said Cecil, ‘I’ll draw up a shooting script...’

Mick and Jim winced.

‘... and we’ll get the, what was it..?’

‘Sony PMW-55,’ guessed Mick.

‘The one!’ said Cecil, ‘We’ll get that Sony PMT thing and start grabbing some footage.’

‘If you like, I could get it out and show it to you,’ said Mick. ‘You could even have a play with it if you want.’

Once again, Miss Dribble’s absence saved the conversation from taking a nasty nosedive.

Mick stood up, went to the bedroom and retrieved the PMW-55 from under his bed. He brought it back to the kitchen and lovingly placed it in the centre of the table.

‘What with one thing and another,’ said Mick, ‘I’ve been too busy to look at it, apart from cleaning Jake’s - er - you know - collateral - off it. I’ll have a blast with the manual tonight.’

Mick surveyed the PMW-55, his eyes full of rampant techno-lust.

Then suddenly he realised.

‘Christ! There’s already footage on it! It must have been switched on when Jake was being attacked.’

49

The three of them huddled together, clutching their cold mugs of tea, and stared at the camera's small viewing screen.

Mick pressed the play button.

It started with a shot of the 'CERTAIN DEATH' sign, then moved to Twinkle dozing peacefully on his corrugated iron sheet. Next, Jake opened the door, and they heard him say, 'Here, Twinkie, Twinkie, Twinkle. Here Twinkie-boy.'

Apart from screams of 'Help' and 'Fuck off', those were the only words recorded, because immediately afterwards, 'Twinkie-boy', spun round and took a gigantic, snarling leap at Jake. The roar sent shivers down the three spines in the audience. It was horrific. Jake obviously countered the lunge and hit Twinkle's fangs with a well-aimed jab of the camera. The shot was as terrifying, as it was incredible.

Twinkle hit the floor of the cage, as Jake grabbed the roof bars and hauled himself up into a bundle. Twinkle leapt again - 200 pounds of merciless muscle with undiminished fang potential. What followed was a nightmarish series of ultra-violent, high-impact, brutal assaults - with Jake's hysterical screams and the unearthly, ear-busting sounds of a wolf anticipating an imminent kill.

But every time Twinkle launched himself up at Jake, the Texan managed to jab the jaws of the beast with his trusty PMW-55. The crack of the impact and the image of Twinkle writhing as he fell back to the floor of the cage, jaws still snapping, was unbelievable. Occasionally, during the onslaught, he missed completely, and the trio were treated to the screeching sound of Twinkle's teeth sliding back down the cage bars. The attack was relentless. Twinkle kept coming and Jake kept jabbing with the camera. Of course, four or five times, Twinkle hit home. There were terrifying screams, blood spurts and strips of tattered flesh, which, occasionally, made it, full screen.

By the time Mick was wiggling his oily tie through the bars, the audience were on the edge of their seats, breathless and sweating profusely at what was, undoubtedly, a sustained and truly primeval level of violence and unfettered aggression.

It finished.

After a few seconds of stunned silence, Mick said, 'Bloody hell.'

Jim said, 'Shit!'

And Cecil said, '15 minutes 24 seconds.'

He turned to Mick and Jim.

'Well, brand my buffalo's big ones,' he said with a mixture of joy, disbelief and greed. 'I do believe, I'm looking at my first Oscar.'

'It was great from the production value point of view,' said Mick.

'Sound was excellent,' said Jim.

'Fuck the production values,' said Cecil. 'Fuck the sound. Did that rip your balls off, or did it rip your balls off? Look at us. We're sweating like wart hogs on a corned beef manufacturer's conveyor belt. This is what slasher fans want. Real violence. Real blood. They know all the tricks we can do with after-effects, adding blood and so on, but this

will blow their brains out! This is the real deal. They know that wolf's not going to stop and say, "Could we go again? I missed my mark," or "Did you get my good side?"

Cecil's voice rose in pitch and volume, so rapidly it hurt everyone's ears.

'That wolf is a majestic beast. A beast for all seasons! A beast too far! One flew over the cuckoo's nest!'

He stood up and strutted.

'He just wants to *kill, kill, kill and keep on killing!* Do you hear that, world! Do you hear that Hollywood! Did you hear that slasher fans! *Kill, kill, kill and keep on killing!*'

Cecil whacked his boots with his crop. His eyes bulged and spittle came flying out, all over the PMW-55 and Jim's eye make-up kit.

'Yes,' he cried, 'yes, yes, *yes!*'

He threw his head back, punched the air rapidly with both fists and made a noise somewhere between a bellow and a mad cackle.

While Mick agreed that the footage was truly sensational, he momentarily wondered if Cecil was the right man to supervise under-10s on a family outing to *Snipers R Us*.

50

In the kitchen at Quagmire Keep, Cecil's manic exuberance for Jake's Twinkle footage had reduced him to a state of near collapse. He flopped down on a chair - exhausted, while still managing to maintain an aura of near ecstasy.

Jim took the pause in histrionics to make three cups of coffee.

They sat at the table, getting their breath back. It was draining, simply watching Cecil and his jodhpurs getting into their stride.

'Thing is,' said Mick, 'it's brilliant footage, and that bit where the end of Jake's broken leg bursts through his jeans...'

'I think we *all* know we're on a winner,' said Cecil, and he gave his coffee a celebratory slurp.

'But,' said Mick, 'we're forgetting one thing.'

'What?'

'The insurance.'

'You said before, you thought we've got a case,' said Jim. 'There was that CERTAIN DEATH sign on the door, and Jake ignored it.'

'I read Percy's fax. There *is* no insurance.'

'He could've made a mistake, give him a ring.'

Jim selected a speed dial, hit conference call, and passed the phone to Mick.

A young man's voice answered. They could all hear the acne.

'Yeah?'

'Is that the *It's Alright He Won't Bite Urban Wolf Sanctuary*?'

'Yeah.'

'Is Percy Spearmint there?'

'No.'

'Where is he?'

'On honeymoon.'

'He got married?'

'No idea.'

'Where did he go?'

'Dunno.'

'When's he back?'

'Dunno.'

'Whose looking after the animals?'

'None left. Closin' down.'

Mick gave the acned person Jim's mobile number.

‘What’s your name?’

The line went dead.

‘Well,’ said Jim, ‘at least you’re not sharing a cabin with him on the Trans-Siberian Express.’

Cecil jumped in.

‘We gotta settle out of court, guys.’

‘Why?’

‘Three reasons, One: as you say, we got no insurance. Two: Jake is a nice guy and, even when Twinkle was busy ripping him another sphincter, he got some blistering footage, which we’ll make a lot of money out of, so let’s float a little his way.’

‘And three?’ asked Mick.

‘Three: Jake’s father is ‘Bullhorn’ McCloud, the most shit-nasty, personal injury lawyer in Galveston – no, make that Texas. Houston housewife cuts her nails in public washroom. Door bangs. Makes her jump. Cuts too much off one nail. Says she was intimidated by the noise, which invaded her safe space. She was ridiculed down at the local beauty salon for saying she got emotional harm, post-traumatic stress disorder and irritable cuticle syndrome. No chance, eh?’

Mick and Jim nodded.

‘Enter Bullhorn McCloud - one broken nail - made it sound like World War III - two million dollar payout! You do not want to dangle anything you value within half a mile of that bastard. Gotta be out of court.’

‘Where can we get the cash? Have you got it?’ asked Mick.

‘No,’ said Cecil, ‘but I have a contact.’

‘Who?’

‘Can’t say - but I’ll phone later and check.’

Jim saw that the responsibility for Jake’s post-Twinkle welfare was no longer an issue for Implosion Productions, so he moved the conversation into less choppy waters. Or so he thought.

‘I don’t know about everyone else, but I’m finding it a bit stuffy in here.’

At that exact moment, when Jim was looking forward to some light discourse about domestic humidity levels and AGA control systems, Miss Dribble strode into the doorway. She stood there, legs apart, twizzling a bottle of Tipp-Ex in what Jim reckoned was an extremely threatening manner.

‘Stuffy eh! Maybe you could all do with a blow job?’

Mick, Cecil and Jim vied with one another over who should be the last to reply.

‘Get a breath of fresh air - up on the jolly old battlements, what!’

They relaxed. The colour returned to their faces and their knees stopped knocking.

Miss Dribble realised what she’d said.

‘Oh, I say - frightfully sorry - what sauce!’

Mick immediately sprang into hit man avoidance mode.

‘Actually, speaking for Jim and I, we’ve picked up a bit of a cold, sore throats and all that. I think we’ll give the battlements a miss.’

‘Lovely view from up there,’ said Miss Dribble.

‘I bet there is,’ mumbled Jim, ‘and a bloody good view of the battlements through a rifle sight.’ Shooting ducks in a fairground came to mind.

‘Oh well,’ said Miss Dribble, ‘perhaps we could go up to one of the towers?’

‘No, thanks,’ said Jim, ‘we wouldn’t like to expose ourselves.’

Before Miss Dribble could get started, Mick jumped in.

‘He means expose ourselves to the chilly winds.’

‘No need for that,’ said Miss Dribble, ‘there’s a spiral stairway built into the wall which comes up inside the southeast tower. Warm as toast. Follow me.’

They did.

*

The tower room was fantastic. Mick saw an opportunity and jumped in with both feet.

‘This is superb,’ he said. ‘Can I apologise, in advance, for being so forward, but could Jim and I take this room, instead of the one leading off the kitchen. We’ve a lot of lines to learn, and it’d be very quiet.’

There was a circular bedroom with two single beds, fabulous views up and down the glen, a couple of chests of drawers to hold their belongings. Plus a nice, big wardrobe for Jim to hang his dresses in. Off the stairway that led up to the tower was a toilet and shower room built into the wall. As Mick had said, it was superb, and they’d be putting some welcome distance between themselves and Miss Dribble’s ripsnorting advances.

‘My dear, dear boys,’ said Miss Dribble, ‘of course you can move in here - although you’ll have to do all the moving yourself - I’m off back to Glasgow tonight - ‘nother fixture with that old scavenger of a publisher of mine. Might be gone a couple of days. And, of course, that nice Mr Bader can have your old room.’

*

Two hours later, they had all their things up in the tower. They’d had a shower, waved Miss Dribble off to Glasgow, told Cecil they were having an early night and were back in the tower with a small crate of *Glencoe M*.

Halfway through the second bottle, Jim’s mind began to wander in the direction of the third target - the enigmatic director of Papa Ratzy - Lew Roller, holed up in his foul-smelling Soho offices.

Mick paid no attention. He was looking out the window, straight down into the back garden where he could see Twinkle asleep in his cage.

‘I’m going to give him a bell,’ said Jim, y’know, just to see if any one’s trying to bump him off.’

‘Please yourself,’ muttered Mick, absentmindedly.

Jim laid back on his bed and phoned. Lew answered, cautiously.

Apparently, all was going well. No hit men. Nothing. Lew had bought a large American fridge freezer and had it stocked full - so he hadn’t been out, at all. Jim

thought it best not to let him know that they'd been under fire. So, he ended the call on a positive note, with the hope that Margate's only helicopter-travelling tramp would soon be in touch to let them know when all Vito 'Teflon' Abbatelli's hit men had been neutralised.

They sat on their beds and continued to drink. Somehow life didn't seem so bad. No Miss Dribble, no Cecil, and they could look forward to a serious day's disguising and filming tomorrow.

Given their location, the conversation drifted to the best films with towers in them. Mick went for Fritz Lang's 1927 *Metropolis*, while Jim plumped for Harold Lloyds's 1923 *Safety Last!*

They needled one another, scored points, disputed facts and generally swore a lot until, eventually, they argued themselves to a deep, worry-free, alcohol-induced sleep - comforting, safe and serene.

In fact, the experience was so sublime, they didn't even flicker an eyelid when at 2.30 am, there was a huge explosion and the top of the tower and part of the wall was unexpectedly blasted clean away.

They continued to sleep the sleep that only a few rare species of drunken idiots can hope to obtain, while the stars shone down from a clear night sky, and a soft blanket of cement dust and slate fragments layered itself delicately onto their gently snoring bodies.

51

The next morning, it began to rain at around eight o'clock. As the first drops spattered on the cement film coving his face, Mick turned over and opened his eyes. At first, the large number of broken stones, bits of shattered roof timbers and splintered sheets of slate tiles surrounding the beds, didn't register.

It had been a rough old night, and after an evening's entertainment in the 3Ls, he quite often awoke to similar scenes, which gradually evaporated once he got the coffee machine kick-started. But this was different. As the cold morning air spiralled down onto his lightly layered cheeks, he suddenly realised how tough it really had been.

'Shit,' he shouted. He jumped up and, despite his head pounding, managed to stagger over the surrounding debris to the mirror, which was hanging at a bizarre angle on what was left of the wall.

He took one look at his dust-covered body, and another at the devastation in the room, and decided this was not the place to gently awaken from your golden slumbers.

'Jim,' he shouted hysterically, 'get up and let's get our arses out of here.'

While Jim was trying to regain consciousness and find his arse, Mick couldn't resist a slight flush of morbid curiosity, and took a few seconds to look closer at the devastation.

The top of the tower and part of a wall had gone. Most masonry was away somewhere in the landscape, apart from the dozen or so large rocks that had landed beside their beds. It certainly put Jim's half-brick experience into perspective.

A clock had fallen off the wall. It had stopped at 2.30.

Mick helped Jim to his feet and, together, they stumbled through the bedroom door, down the stone spiral stairs, along between the Keep walls and into the kitchen.

'Try Cecil,' said Mick, pointing to the bedroom door, 'I'll put the kettle on - my mouth tastes like a the two-week-old clinker scrapings from a copper sporran.'

Jim looked into to Cecil's room.

'He's fast asleep. Must have been Glencoe Massacred, just like us.'

'Leave him be,' muttered Mick, pouring the tea, 'we've got to make some decisions, and quick.'

'First, Miss Dribble.'

'What about the cops?'

'She'll point us in the right direction.'

'OK,' said Jim, 'here you go.'

He handed over the phone.

Mick dialled and put the phone on speaker. Jim noted that, in this desperate situation, he didn't do the 'where do I put my fingers - the buttons are too small - oh look, I've phoned the *Rampant Regalia* sex shop at the end of Greek Street' routine.

Miss Dribble answered. Even though it was pretty early in the morning, she was busy. Obviously, the busyness involved her publisher. Jim was about to have an educated guess, when Mick started speaking.

He told her what had happened.

‘Oh, hard cheese chaps! But putting the old overview goggles on, I’m glad you survived! Sounds like a lightning strike to me!’

Interrupted only by the publisher’s unnecessarily, ecstatic groaning, she reached over, for her mobile phone and read out two numbers. One was the police – ask for Chief Inspector McFurgus - he’s such a dear - and two was Mackinroys Builders in Ballachulish, just down the road.

Mick might have pressed the wrong button, because the groaning volume suddenly increased. He wisely decided to hang up and phone the police.

Eventually, he was put through to Chief Inspector McFurgus.

‘Aye.’

‘My name’s Mick Barton, and I’m phoning from Quagmire Keep. We think we’ve had a lightening strike.’

‘Jings! Is the poor wee lassie aw richt?’

‘Yes. She was away in Glasgow, last night.’

‘Och! I’ll be over, directly, the noo.’

‘We’ll be here, the noo, as well.’

Then the Chief Inspector had second thoughts.

‘On second thoughts,’ he said. ‘I have to drive o’er to Aberdeen Airport, something about a wee forged import license. Still I’ll be over this evening, the noo.’

‘We’ll be here the noo, just as before.’

The second call was to the builders, who said they could come over and start reconstruction that afternoon. Apparently, Ballachulish used to have a slate quarry and they had lots of old tiles, perfect for restoration work.

‘Wow!’ said Jim, ‘and we thought we were well oiled!’

*

When Cecil awoke from his Glencoe Massacre, and after a full English Alka-Seltzer breakfast, Jim told him what had happened in the night.

‘What, blew right off?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you get any footage?’

Jim crumbled some more breakfast into a glass of water and handed it over.

Cecil drank it, then sat silently for another half hour.

Eventually, the breakfast worked, and he became reasonably coherent. They led him up to view the devastation.

His first thoughts were that it wasn’t dynamite or lightening, although he did remember some thunder in the night - but suspected it might have been *Glencoe M* banging round his head.

As his brain cells began to reassemble, some interesting facts started to be revealed.

Cecil hadn't always been a slasher movie film director. He'd previously been employed as gunner in the US Army, and as a hobby, he'd built up a great deal of experience about weapons from the American Civil War. His speciality was cannons.

Before Civil War Re-enactments were codified and controlled, and before lunatics were banned, Cecil and his friends would truck an old cannon out into the backwoods and fire cannonballs around the landscape to their hearts' content - with a particular interest in farmhouses and barns, which hopefully were unoccupied.

He knew exactly the impact a cannonball could have on an old stone building, even at a distance.

He told Mick and Jim what he suspected had been used.

'But that's crazy,' said Jim, 'who'd do anything like that? And where would you get an old cannon from?'

'No idea,' said Cecil, 'but looking at the impact distribution pattern of the masonry, I'd stake my next Oscar on it.'

Looking through the remaining tower window, he estimated, that, if it *was* an ancient cannon, the most likely firing place was a ridge leading down to the lake, about a mile to the south.

'See, if your firing position was there, you'd get extra range and height. But it was one hell of a shot in the dark – that, or one hell of a lucky son-of-a-bitch.'

Mick wouldn't have exactly described the carnage as 'lucky' but decided to move the conversation on.

'Well, it's up to the local cops to sort it out - they'll be coming round this evening.'

Cecil's appearance changed from that of a bright-eyed, historical ballistics expert to someone who looked shifty and extremely worried.

He said he'd prefer not to meet policemen, and offered to go down to the *Copper Sporrán*, which was having a Discounted Teacake Festival that evening. Mick and Jim suspected he'd end up down the *Surprise Attack Arms* or the other pub, *The Clotted Claymore*, the delights of which Mick and Jim had not sampled, given the assassination scenarios and the amount of *Glencoe M* available *chez* Quagmire.

52

The builders came in the afternoon and put a tarpaulin over the devastated tower.

Late afternoon, a taxi arrived and off went Cecil with a cheery wave of his riding crop.

This left Mick and Jim alone to plan their next move, which was to find that bloody cannon and do something about it.

They sat in the kitchen and thought.

There was a bit of a track up to the ridge, and it was tempting to just drive up and take a look. But assassin-boy might still be hanging around, and if he'd been watching the Keep for a couple of days, he'd easily recognise the Morris and its targets.

And it was no use walking up there in their normal togs.

Much to Jim's dismay, Mick decided they had to put the theatricals on.

As usual, Jim tried to get out of it.

'But you could go up there on your own.'

Mick was firm that they had to go together. To the hit man, a lissom young wench would be much better cover than a bearded bloke in wellies.

Jim countered with the fact that his ballet shoes hadn't arrived.

There was some affable discussion about transgender rights, which ended with Mick threatening to stuff Jim's head in the AGA's oven, or sitting him firmly on the hot plate. So reason prevailed and they got out their clothes - and dressed the part - wellingtons substituting for ballet shoes.

'It's terrible,' said Jim, 'say, when we're trekking up there, we come across some West End impresario who just happens to like twilight walks in the glens. What's he going to think? This long, golden hair, lovely dress, fluttery eyelashes and wellies. He's going to think, I'm not auditioning her for my next West End Play.'

'No,' said Mick, 'he's going to think, "Fuck me, I wish I'd packed my tazer."'

They grabbed a couple of torches from the kitchen drawers, rumbled downstairs and walked round to the back of the Keep. After getting Twinkle fully harnessed-up, they began the walk to the ridge.

It was twilight, and by the time they reached the ridge, it would be dark. Jim commented on how the hit man wouldn't be able to see them. Mick didn't comment on how Lidl had a Buy One Get One Free sniper rifle night sight offer on at the moment. There was no point in starting a panic, however funny he thought the line was. So he decided to comment on how Twinkle was enjoying the walk. The wolf seemed glad to be out, after his in-cage exercise with Jake and the PMW-55.

Despite the moon coming out, they reached the start of the lake, without being shot. It was also an easy, bullet-free climb to the top of the ridge, but there was nothing but bushes and brambles.

Nothing that was, until Twinkle relieved himself. It was a Twinkle special, with spray rising in a graceful arc, some eight feet into the air. It shimmered in the moonlight. If it hadn't been so disgusting, it would've been beautiful.

Mick shone his torch briefly in the direction of Twinkle's target. And, suddenly, there it was! An old cannon, well camouflaged in the undergrowth. It had a long, iron barrel and huge wheels, which must have been about five foot high. And it was pointing directly at their tower, or at least, where their tower had been.

Mick patted Twinkle's head and tied his leash to a bush.

They stood there and thought, but not for long. They were on the edge of the ridge and there was a gradual slope that ran right down to the lake. Mick tried thinking like an engineer. The fucking thing, that had so nearly ended their dubious acting careers, would be doing 50 mph when it hit the water. But, it was surrounded by bushes, and you didn't need to be an engineer to see it must have weighed at least a ton - *and* it faced 90 degrees to the slope.

He gave it a half-hearted push. It wouldn't budge.

Shit! Tomorrow night, perhaps even later this evening, the hit man would be lining the cannon up for another shot.

They faced the dreadful prospect of sharing a bedroom with Cecil. And who knows, while the hit man might have just got lucky last night, tonight he might be off target and score an accidental bullseye on their new sleeping quarters.

They had to do something. Mick jammed his engineering hat on and started to run through his admittedly, sparsely populated engineers' alphabet.

A is for Absolutely No Idea.

B is for Blast.

C is for Catastrophe.

D is for Dynamite.

E is for - see F.

F is for Fuck Knows.

And on it went. Even Mick was surprised, when he passed by I for Implosion, how many words were to do with devastation and destruction. Still, he supposed that, if had had an ultra-pessimistic view of life and its opportunities and relationships, a good Harley Street psychoanalyst, after several weeks of therapy, would tell him it was good to let it all hang out.

So Mick continued on through the pathetic list of engineering solutions, consoling himself with the amount he was saving in psychoanalysts' bills.

He was coming to the end of what was proving to be a totally pointless exercise, apart from revealing his depressed alter ego, or something like that.

U is for Uranium leak

V is for Velocity of impact.

W is for - and just as he was about to catalogue W in the rather crowded Fuck Knows section - a word appeared from nowhere.

W is for Wolfpower.

That was it!

The first thing to do was tempt Twinkle into helping. Mick dug his hand into his pocket and pulled out a pound of raw liver. This was being held in reserve, to tempt Twinkle back, if he broke free. It did the trick.

Mick fixed the 200-pounds of liver-savaging timber wolf to the end of the end of the barrel. Then using little titbits of liver to guide Twinkle in the right direction, and with Jim pushing, as well, they slowly turned the cannon round to face the lake.

Mick was triumphant.

‘Thank you, James, thank you. I’m sorry I used up all the liver on Twinkle, but you can have some when we get back to the Keep. I’ll even wash your bowl out.’

Jim was slumped over the barrel. He was so exhausted, he couldn’t speak, but he gave Mick some hand signals by way of reply.

The cannon was now at the top of the slope that ran down, directly into the lake. All it took was one small push and, within seconds, it hit the water. The splash was enormous, but half a minute later, the moonlight showed there was not a single ripple on the surface. Smooth as glass.

‘Let’s see how good the bastard’s next shot’s gonna be,’ muttered Mick. ‘Let’s get back.’

Jim agreed - particularly as the hit man could be around and may well have been attracted by the noise. Although he comforted himself that all he would have to do was get Mick to slip Twinkle’s leash, and murderous bugger wouldn’t be around for long.

In this space, Jim was certain - no one would hear you scream.

53

They were soon safely back in the Keep. Twinkle had snuggled down on his corrugated iron sheet with an extra helping of liver, should he get peckish, and Mick and Jim sat upstairs in the glow of the AGA, glasses of *Glencoe M* in hand.

Gone were the theatrical clothes - the beard, the long, golden wig and the wellies. All that remained was a faint trace of Chanel No. 5 and a false eyelash that was still partially attached to Jim's left eyelid.

They were discussing ways it might be removed - ranging from dabbing it with battery acid to a gentle warming with a blow-torch, including Mick's preferred option - opening the kitchen door, attaching the eyelash to the door knob with string, then slamming the door shut.

Mick had just given Jim a tea cloth to bite down on and was about to go for a dry run, when a little tinkle announced a visitor.

Mick ambled off downstairs. Mainly because he was proud of the little bell he'd bought and Sellotaped to the coiled spring, which was attached to the wire, which ran down to the porcelain lavatory chain outside the front door. But also because he knew, in his heart, that Jim was suspicious of the slammed door solution and was on the point of having hysterics.

In fact, Jim was beyond hysterics, but even his advanced state of disarray could not disguise the fact that, deep down, there was part of his brain that was cool - even clever - in an ill-defined sort of way. Twenty years of listening carefully to recorded sound had given him an acute ability to identify and classify anything. In addition to perceived pitch, duration, delay and timbre, he was on good terms with acoustic impedance, spectral response, transients, the spread and intensity of overtones, theta wave cycles and spatial location. Put it all together and his brain was the proud owner of an holistic armoury of advanced sound analysis and identification. Or, to put it another way, he could easily tell there was a copper coming up the stairs.

The Chief Inspector stood in the doorway, a round man in a camel overcoat with a brown velvet collar and a trilby.

Jim immediately, but casually, took the tea towel out of his mouth, sat up straight and looked innocent. It could have been another trilby spycam.

They introduced themselves. The Chief Inspector's name was Fergus McFurgus.

'Right ye are!' he said, 'let's go upstairs and take a wee look.'

With that, he turned and headed off up to the tower. Mick signalled for Jim to come along, but Jim signalled back that he'd rather not come. Mick mouthed a reply. Jim's lip-reading skills were poor, bordering on non-existent, but as far as he could make out, it went: You fracking idle funkking funkier. I'm gonna fracking rip your funkking bull oxoff. Or something like that.

Five minutes later, CI McFurgus was back, and Mick seemed to have forgotten his silent, badly mouthed threats.

The CI sat down in a kitchen chair and spread himself out.

'Well, well, what a couple of lucky, wee laddies! It must have been a lightening strike. Aren't you worried it might happen again?'

‘No,’ chorused Mick and Jim with just a touch too much confidence.

‘And tell me,’ said the CI, ‘I’m trained to notice these sorts of things. What’s yon insect dangling off yer eyelid.’

‘It’s a false eyelash,’ said Jim. He immediately wished he’d added more words to qualify the sentence.

‘Don’t be embarrassed laddie, or should it be lassie? I’ve been in the force a long time and what people do behind their front doors couldn’t shock me in the slightest.’

‘No, no,’ said Jim.

‘I mean, I go on courses for all that LGBTQQO+ stuff. Nowadays, good cops have to be sensitive to people’s sexual preferences. Mind you, I prefer a straightforward bunk up, m’sell.’

‘No, no,’ said Jim again. ‘I’m in a film.’

‘Again, no problem,’ said the CI, ‘I take all that in my stride. Sometimes we have a little, late-night screening of some of the confiscated Scandinavian DVDs, down the Police canteen. Keeps the lad’s morale up.’

‘No, no - a *real* film! I play this hard-as-nails, SAS commando who goes under cover as a woman.’

‘Oh,’ said the CI, ‘McFurgus may have picked up the wrong trail there. Still, let’s have a look at it.’

Jim moved his eyelid close, and the CI whipped out a magnifying glass.

‘It’s stuck,’ he said.

‘I know,’ said Jim.

‘And do you know what you need?’

‘No.’

‘The world’s most amazing solvent.’

‘What’s that?’

The CI paused for effect.

‘*Glencoe Massacre.*’

‘The whisky?’

‘You don’t have a wee dram of it about?’

As the CI, obviously, hadn’t the slightest suspicion about their cannon-rolling activities earlier that evening, Mick felt he could relax. He took a bottle from his inside pocket and placed it on the table.

‘There you are doc, do your worst!’

The CI picked up the bottle, held it up and admired its colour in the light.

‘Beautiful! Seems a pity to waste it on a false eyelash.’

‘It does,’ said Mick, procuring three glasses and filling them to the brim.

The CI knocked his back in one, then pulling out a handkerchief, dipped a corner in the drop that remained, ran it along the eyelash and the job was done.

‘This calls for a celebration!’ said Mick, ‘Well done that man!’

‘Aye, another drop would go down a treat!’

Seven or eight treats later, they’d run out of normal conversation, and the discussion moved on to more interesting areas, admittedly without the erudite sentence construction and verbs that had dominated the first two glasses. Even the body language was becoming slurred.

‘Tell me wee laddie, do you like Robbie Burns?’

‘I do,’ said Jim.

‘To a mouse?’

‘My favourite.’

‘Maybe you can give us a wee recitation?’

‘Sure,’ said Jim.

This was news to Mick. As far as he was aware, Jim’s poetic repertoire consisted of *There was a young man from Nantucket* and *Eskimo Nell*.

Jim kicked off.

‘I wandered lonely as a cloud. That floats on high...’

‘Hang on a wee while, that’s nay it,’ interrupted the CI.

‘No, no,’ said Jim, ‘I’m sure it is, the mouse bit comes later on.’

He stopped and belched.

‘Or maybe it’s a mouse trap.’

‘Here, let me show you,’ said the CI, and he stood up rather unsteadily.

Wee, sleeket, cowran, tim’rous beastie,

O, what a panic’s in thy breastie!

Thou need na start awa sae hasty,

Wi’ something, something, something!

‘Can you do it in English?’ said Jim. ‘I only got the “something, something, something” bit.’

The CI realised that that the repetition signified a sad end to the wee tim’rous beastie and, unfortunately for Mick and Jim, he changed the subject.

‘See, I’m just an old-fashioned Scottish cop, brought up on Robbie Burns, Jimmy Shand and Moira Anderson.’

He lurched slightly and waved his glass in the air.

‘Do you like Moira Anderson? I love Moira Anderson. I’ve got all Moira Anderson’s records. They go round and round and songs come out.’

The next half hour featured the CI standing on his chair and singing an extended selection of Moira’s hits, which Mick supposed must have had a tune when they were originally recorded.

Eventually, the CI ran out of songs and slumped down in his chair to polite, if intermittent, applause.

Mick's vision was going, but with a gargantuan effort, he managed to lurch the conversation away from Scottish light entertainers of the early 60s.

'Miss Dribble - seems to know you well.'

The CI's face, already crimson after his performance, became even brighter.

'Ah yes - she's a wonderful lassie. And she means the world to me.'

The CI paused and breathed in, held his breath, then released it in a slow whistle. He leaned forward and whispered.

'You look like decent fellows who can keep a secret.'

Mick and Jim nodded, even though, from past experience, they'd found that secrets usually generated unwanted sexual advances, physical injury or death threats.

CI McFurgus drew himself up, then deflated his body before he spoke. His voice was even quieter.

'You see chaps, I'm a total fraud.'

He sat back in his chair, and it all came out.

Mick and Jim had drunk so much they were only slightly aware that the Scots accent had gone and nothing was 'wee' anymore.

Apparently, for some years, he'd been a policeman in Chichester where he'd fallen totally in love with Miss Dribble. When she inherited Quagmire Keep and decided to move to Glencoe, he was devastated. The only good news in the whole sorry tale was that her new husband had died on their wedding night.

He tried to get a job with the local Glencoe force, but didn't even make the shortlist.

So the CI changed tack. He got a new name and signed up for acting lessons to learn how to do a Scottish accent, and had taken history lessons to learn about Scottish history, culture, football teams and all that.

When he next applied, he walked it.

Within a month, CI McFurgus was living and working within a few miles of the woman he loved.

He'd called on Miss Dribble to introduce himself as the new local CI. She was delighted to see him. So delighted that, when he awoke 14 hours later in her bed, he was battered, but in heaven.

Miss Dribble had to explain the uncomfortable fact that she was building a roster of paramours to help stimulate her writing, and would let him know when she could next fit him in. This was a blow to the CI, but he consoled himself when he heard their passionate interlude was interwoven into her next book, *My truncheon is not for bending* by Noel Schitt-Sherlock.

The CI leaned across the table to pick up the bottle of *Glencoe M*, but it was too heavy.

'So now, gentlemen, we consort intimately, once a month. Which is lot better than sod all.'

Having endured one of Miss Dribble's intimate consortations, Jim couldn't bear the through of it happening again, let alone being part of an organised timetable. He decided to change the subject, and, hopefully, get his own back on Miss Dribble. The words were long and difficult, but his desire for revenge powered him on.

‘Ere, you’re a copper, what about this *Glencoe M* production facility and warehousing in the basement?’

‘Oh, that!’ said CI McFurgus with a beaming smile, ‘fantastic, eh!’

Jim was deflated, but pushed on.

‘Isn’t it illegal?’

‘Yes and no. In the true definition of the word illegal, yes it is. But if you look at it as a tradition that goes back centuries, and allow for the fact that every member of the force gets a dozen free bottles at Christmas and another dozen at New Year, plus I get my leg over once a month, then it doesn’t seem so bad. Police work is all about recognising the subtleties surrounding any specific situation.’

‘And,’ he continued, ‘Miss Dribble is a rather special person. Do you know she can trace her lineage right back to Ezekiel Campbell, who build this magnificent Keep in 1692. She’s the last of that particular line of the Campbell clan. There was an article all about it in the *Chichester Herald*.’

This seemingly superfluous genealogical and media information washed over Mick and Jim, without the slightest hint of how soon it would contribute to a situation that could result in their sudden and very violent deaths.

CI McFurgus left at 11, and at half past, while they were tentatively sipping black coffee, Mick and Jim heard the sound of a taxi drawing up.

‘Must be Cecil,’ said Jim.

‘Cecil who?’ said Mick. His attempt to dull the pain during the CI’s Moira Anderson onslaught, had led to an excessive consumption of the house single malt.

‘Cecil Beader, our producer.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Listen, he’s trying to get the key in the lock.’

‘News to me,’ said Mick vaguely.

‘Never mind, I’ll go and let him in.’

Jim stood up and, eventually, found the kitchen door.

The doorbell started ringing.

Jim turned round and, ever aware of his own health and safety, began to crawl down the stairs backwards. He thought, briefly, how different this was to the clarity of thought and action he’d experienced during their period of paparazzi abstinence, but his foot slipped and he banged his ankle, right where the half-brick had hit it.

For the rest of his journey down to the front door, he decided to think of nothing apart from where to put his hands and feet. It was slow, but it worked.

He drew back the bolts and opened the door, just as Cecil was having another lunge with the key.

They collided and collapsed in a heap on the stone floor. They’d both achieved what they wanted, so they sat there and had a congratulatory five minutes, leaning back against the walls, breathing.

Eventually, Cecil spoke.

‘Fancy seeing you here.’

It was obvious to Jim that Cecil was suffering from all the *Surprise Attack Arms* and *The Clotted Claymore* could throw at him.

After a long, tortuous climb back to the kitchen, Jim stood up, but Cecil continued to crawl in the direction of his bedroom door. Unfortunately, his aim wasn’t too good, and he banged his face into the wall.

The noise woke Mick from a lovely dream where he was giving a solo demonstration to the British Society of Cinematographers, about how to flick peas into his belly button.

He looked vaguely across at Cecil, who was having a second go at pushing his face through the wall.

‘Hello, Cess, me old mate. Good time at the *Copper Sporrán* Discounted Teacake Fest?’

Jim, showing compassion beyond Mick’s wildest imaginings, guided Cecil through the bedroom door, where, using his Jodhpurs as handles, dragged him onto the bed.

The next morning broke bright and clear. It was a pity Mick, Jim and Cecil were unable to match it in terms of brightness and clearness.

Cecil lay unmoved on his bed and Mick and Jim were still sleeping, sat in their kitchen chairs, heads on the table. There had been some activity. The Sony PMW-55 was on the surface and Mick's index finger was on the on-off button. Today was the first day of shooting, and there had obviously been an attempt to have some last-minute, late-night practice with the videocamera, but locating the on-off switch seemed to be as far as they'd got.

Still, four hours later, they were showered, dressed in the hunter and nymphet clothes, and Cecil had put on a clean pair of jodhpurs.

They sat round the kitchen table and Cecil threw a sheaf of papers on the surface. He banged it with his riding crop.

'That's it,' he cried. 'One hundred per cent pure gold. One of the most brilliant shooting scripts I've ever written. Better than *Nightmare on Sycamore Street*, better than the *Bridesmaids of Frankenstein*, even better than *There's a Werewolf in my Cesspit*.'

The world would soon see.

Once they were in the car park, Mick loaded Twinkle into the back of the Morris, and they headed off to Old Lob's cottage.

They arrived complete with the camera, a Thermos flask, a bottle of *Glencoe M* and a blood-stained plastic carrier bag containing Twinkle's dinner.

'Right,' said Cecil, 'first off are close-ups of the beast, looking mean, moody and murderous.'

'No problem,' said Mick, 'that's his default mode.'

They walked off into the forest with Twinkle padding along in his harness. This was it. Whatever *it* was going to be.

They reached a spot where the sun was breaking through.

'Just get him to poke his head out of the ferns,' said Cecil, 'we'll get some sunlight to flash on his teeth in after-effects.'

Mick and Twinkle did what they were told. Except that several times, Twinkle yawned. Cecil was, however, ecstatic.

'Great, we can dub the sound of a roaring lion over those yawns.'

'Maybe mixed in with some motorbike sounds and a distant explosion in a quarry,' said Jim, without thinking.

'Hey,' said Cecil, 'you're not just a pretty face.'

Jim's planned response was stopped in its tracks by Mick using his axe to mime someone aiming a rifle.

But, all in all, it went well. There were some running shots, which were difficult, as Mick had to run with Twinkle.

'Don't worry about the harness,' said Cecil, 'we'll take that out in after effects, or use special effects, so all the punters see is a blurred, dangerous wolf.'

It was almost as if Twinkle knew what was expected of him. Mick's hand-held camera shots looked superb, he ran alongside Twinkle dragging the lens through the ferns, which

must have been a relief for the optics, having previously been bashed repeatedly into Twinkle's blood stained fangs by the unfortunate, but plucky, Jake.

Twinkle's shots over, it was time for Jim to take the stage, or rather the clearing. He got over his first night, or first early afternoon, nerves. The dress fitted beautifully, thanks to some serious scissoring and tacking with the staples he'd found in Miss Dribble's desk drawer.

Cecil had found a shepherds crook in Old Lob's shed, and decorated it with a bow of pink ribbon. It was the pink ribbon Miss Dribble had used to tie Jim to the bed during their first, and thank God, only, physical encounter.

The pink ballet shoes, size ten, had arrived earlier that morning in a reinforced box.

'Right,' said Cecil, 'here's your motivation. You're lost in the big, wide world, this is your first time in the deep, dark forest. You're really frightened.'

Jim was no actor but, to be fair, he'd done a terrific impression of being a dead body when Mick had dragged him from the helipad to the Morris, around the Five Crowns Hotel. Now, he suddenly found it easy to look frightened. Not frightened about being lost in the deep, dark forest, but frightened that the hit man might have eaten a hearty breakfast in the *Copper Sporrán* and be out on the prowl.

Mick tied Twinkle's harness to a tree and set up the camera. The first take was reasonable.

'Maybe you need to have like a little more fear in your eyes,' said Cecil. 'You are a sweet young girl and this is the big, bad forest, Ahhrrgghhhh!'

He gave a deranged roar so animated he nearly vomited over himself. Still, if that was what passed as stage direction in LA, so be it.

Mick did some more fiddling with the PMW-55, then everything was ready.

'Lights, camera, action,' he called out, not that there were any lights.

This time, Jim was much more animated. In fact, he was *super* animated. He could've been going for the Oscar he'd been so cruelly cheated of, by the skip-in-the-alley experience.

His eyes bulged, his bottom lip began to tremble and his top lip would have trembled, had it not been for the weight of sweat.

Mick was just about to say, 'Let's go again, that was a bit over the top, love', when Cecil spoke. His tone was quiet, his words evenly spaced, with just a tinge of hysteria.

'Turn-the-camera-through-180-degrees-*now*.'

Mick slowly rotated the camera and realised that Jim hadn't been overacting. In fact, given Jim's penchant for self-preservation above all costs, he'd been playing it rather cool.

On the opposite side of the clearing stood four wolves. They all had the same menacing, low growl. They started to pad slowly forwards towards Little Jim McRiding Hood. This was not the way you'd want to get motivated, effective though it was.

Mick kept the camera focussed but back-tracked to the side of the clearing, basically to give the shot more movement and add a dynamic imperative to the action, but more importantly to give the wolves a clear run at Jim. Plus, he didn't think the PMW-55 could take another hammering.

Jim realised lots of things. Top of the list was the fact that he'd been dropped in it and there was no way out. He tried to shout but no sound came out. He banged Old Lob's crook aggressively on the ground. It disintegrated in a cloud of dust. He backed up to a large tree.

The leader of the wolves advanced. He crouched down ready to spring. The other wolves bared their fangs, but stayed back, looking forward to the kill.

Cecil bravely started to climb a nearby tree. Mick kept filming but backed into a bush.

The lead wolf had decided enough was enough. This young girl was defenceless. He sprang. It was a huge leap, accompanied by a vicious snarl, bared fangs and flashing electric-blue eyes. It was the jugular or nothing.

Strange to relate, in terms of Cecil's, Mick's, and especially Jim's expectations, it turned out to be nothing.

55

The lead wolf's rapidly travelling incisors must have been no more than six inches away from Jim's palpitating throat. In fact, he could smell its hot, putrid breath. Not, of course, that the smell was his top priority. In fact, he had no priorities. His brain, along with time, had frozen solid.

And in that frozen time, something amazing happened - 200 pounds of familiar, but unexpected, fury shot across his vision, grabbed the lead wolf's throat, and propelled it to the forest floor with a gigantic crash.

Twinkle's attack was lightning fast and vicious, the level of wanton violence unprecedented – mind you, given the circumstances, Jim was happy to see as much wanton violence as Twinkle could produce.

The two animals fought across the clearing. It was chaos. A spine-chilling, cacophony of primeval, ear-splitting snarls and roars. And there was blood. Lots of it.

Not that Jim noticed, but the other wolves backed off and let them get on with it. Then, after about 30 seconds, it was all over. The lead wolf lay on his back whimpering, while Twinkle stood over him, raised his muzzle to the light dappling through the high branches of the trees, and let out an extended howl of triumph.

The wounding and humiliation of the lead wolf had an immediate effect on the rest. They backed off. As the lead wolf tried to slink away, Twinkle attacked the others. Nothing too much, a good shaking by the scruff of the neck, a scratch down the side of the face, a few bites that were little more than flesh wounds on their bellies as they rolled over in submission. So, with what was left of their tails between their legs, accompanied by plaintive wails and whines, they disappeared into the undergrowth.

Twinkle turned and padded back to Jim. He was slumped against a tree, a mess of steaming, stained theatrical props and Chanel no 5, with additional blubbering. The wolf stared at him, gave a disgusted look, as if to say 'what a wimp', then padded off to his harness, picked it up in his mouth, took it over to Mick, and waited while he fixed it back in place.

'Bloody hell,' said Mick, 'I reckon that was all about being an Alpha male.'

'You know all about that then?' said Jim, through parched lips.

'He slipped his harness and attacked to show who's boss - there was no way Twinkle was going to let that young punk feel it had a right to lead an attack when *he* was in the forest.'

Cecil had climbed back down the tree and walked over.

'I'm sure you guys understand that, if I was going to direct the scene with real class, it'd be good to get a high vantage point, you know, like get some real perspective on the action. Did you get it all?'

'Yes,' said Mick, 'and how much did you say your money man was going to pay us?'

'Well,' said Cecil, brushing the sweat off his jodhpurs, 'there was a bit of leeway in the budget.'

'Forty thousand each,' said Mick.

'OK,' said Cecil.

Negotiations over, they lifted Jim up. He looked into their faces.

‘I thought I was going to die.’

‘But just think,’ said Mick, ‘thanks to the recent renegotiations, you’d have had an extra forty thousand quid to leave to your relatives.’

‘I haven’t got any relatives,’ said Jim, slumping back down.

‘OK, well, you could’ve left the dosh to Polly the Parrot. I mean, we could’ve used it to give him elocution lessons, and gradually purge his brain of all the obscene muck he’s picked up.’

Not surprisingly, Jim had no comment to make.

Cecil had already forgotten all about the pay hike. He looked at Mick and Jim, and thought about patting Twinkle on the head, but then decided against it, as he would need all his fingers to re-type the new scene into the script.

‘You know guys, I think I’m going to get a second Oscar.’

‘And I think it’s time we got back to the Keep,’ said Mick, as he slipped his hand into the blood-stained carrier bag, and tossed two pounds of raw liver to the star of the show.

56

The six-man team of builders was already hard at work. Cecil was reworking the script with his perfectly preserved fingers. Mick and Jim were resting in one of the undestroyed towers, and Twinkle was in his cage, chewing on bits of scrap metal and dreaming of being leader of the pack.

Eventually, Jim got fed up of doing nothing.

'You know, Michael, those four wolves - Miss Dribble has her finger on the local pulse, not to mention everything else, maybe *she* knows what's going on?'

'OK,' said Mick, 'I suppose you want me to make the call - I can sense you're anxious not to kick-start her hormones.'

'Correct.'

Miss Dribble wasn't engaged in physical activity with her publisher, and the call was moan and grunt free.

She was keen to know how the building work was progressing. Mick assured her it was going brilliantly and made a mental note to pop over later and find out.

'Something else, Melissa,' said Mick, 'when we were shooting in the forest this afternoon, we had a nasty brush with four wolves. Any idea what they were doing there?'

'Ah,' said Miss Dribble, in a tone that most people reserve for the words 'oh, shit!'

'I'm afraid *I'm* to blame.'

'How come?'

'Well, about a year ago, I was reading an article by Viceroy Smith, the eco-conservationist in the *Manchester Gleaner*. I was at a low ebb - I was not myself. It was the time when I was researching writing *History of Canal Dredging in N.E. Scotland 1802-1857*.'

'This Viceroy chappie was going on about how good it would be to release young wolves into the wilds of Scotland. The article had a picture of him - rather dishy, so I thought maybe, if I invited him to the Keep, he could release the wolves without attracting the attention of the police - and I might get to meet the first of my paramours.'

'And?'

'And that's what happened. There was a release of the wolves and a huge release of amorous intent on my part.'

'Did he stay long?'

'No, the next morning, he scarpered before the sun came up. Still, he served his purpose. How were the wolves?'

'Engaging.'

'Super.'

'Well thank you Melissa, any idea when you'll be back?'

'A few days yet, we've some hard negotiations to complete, several times, with any luck.'

Before she could get started, he got in first.

‘OK, give us a call when you’re finished. Cheers.’

Mick explained the situation to Jim, who contributed to finding a solution by saying, ‘Oh fuck!’

‘It’s like this,’ said Mick, ‘we gotta get the wolves out of the forest before we do any more shooting - I can’t have my favourite sound man getting chewed up too badly.’

‘Why not?’ said Jim, ‘It didn’t bother you when Miss Dribble was giving me a going over.’

‘Look,’ said Mick, ‘why don’t I phone this Viceroy bloke at the *Manchester Gleaner* and put the finger on him. Bit of blackmail. I’ve got witnesses that say you released them, and I’m a good friend of Chief Inspector McFurgus. And if he wants to get nasty, I’ve got a mate, called Jim, who’s gone down three times for GBH. That should do it.’

‘Yeah,’ said Jim, ‘but we’ve got to trap the bleeders, first.’

‘Ah! Strange you should mention that, old chum. I have a plan - after all, I’m good with Twinkle.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Jim, ‘they didn’t look the type to be impressed by a tie soaked in Castrol 10W-30.’

‘All will be revealed later. But now it’s telephone time.’

Much to his disgust, Mick was getting used to using a mobile phone. He logged on to the internet, got the *Manchester Gleaner’s* number, and phoned.

‘Hello, could I speak to Viceroy Smith?’

The voice explained that Viceroy was away on a month’s assignment, photographing and writing about butterflies in the tropical rainforests of Madagascar.

‘I’m a colleague of Percy Spearmint of the Norwood *It’s Alright He Won’t Bite Urban Wolf Sanctuary*, and I have some important, confidential news - do you have Viceroy’s mobile number?’

He was in luck. The trainee receptionist, whose mentor had just gone for a quick pee, read out the number.

Mick pressed the ‘End call’ button, without even looking, and dialled Viceroy’s phone.

After a few seconds, the call was answered.

‘Viceroy, here.’

‘Hello, Mr Smith, I was wondering if I could have a quick word with you?’

‘Sorry, but, I’m in a tropical rainforest at the moment, conditions are hellish, not to say dangerous - I’m surprised you managed to get through, I’ll have to hang up, as we’ve been trying to phone for an air ambulance - guy with a broken leg.’

‘Hang on,’ said Mick, ‘forgive me for asking, but is that Dean Martin playing in the background?’

‘Yeah, it’s on my iPad, it’s relaxing the guy with the broken leg.’

Just then another voice could be heard.

‘Here we are, sir - a Manhattan for you and Harvey Wallbangers for the three young ladies.’

‘Mr Smith,’ said Mick, ‘are we going to stop this 5-star jungle stuff, ‘cos what I’m about to say will help you avoid ending your journalistic career, to say nothing of a prison sentence.’

There was a pause.

‘OK, shoot.’

‘I know about the four wolves you released in Glencoe. I have a witness to the release, and you might like to know that, recently, the bastards nearly killed one of my colleagues.’

‘Oh.’

‘You should go down a bundle with the red tops, especially with a name like Viceroy, along with you lying about being in the jungle, while living it up for a month in some beach-front hotel.’

‘What do you want?’

‘I’m going to trap the wolves tonight. I want you to send someone up immediately to Glencoe to collect them. I’m sure you remember Quagmire Keep and Miss Dribble, don’t you?’

Viceroy whimpered slightly.

‘All the driver has to do is deliver them down to the *It’s Alright He Won’t Bite Urban Wolf Sanctuary*, and stay there until Percy Spearmint gets back from honeymoon.’

Viceroy mumbled, ‘OK.’

‘By the way,’ Mick added, ‘the butterfly photographs and articles, let me guess - local tourist shop?’

‘Could be,’ said Viceroy. ‘But you wont say anything to the managing editor? I mean I’ve still got a fortnight of this to go.’

‘A deal is a deal, said Mick, and sure as my name is - on second thoughts - never mind what my name is, goodbye.’

And with that satisfyingly sinister end to the sentence, he hung up.

The only thing that wasn’t satisfying was that he had absolutely no idea of how he was going to trap four wolves, without being gnawed irretrievably to death.

Just as Fate was being unkind to Michael Barton, it was beginning to shine a little light through the grimy windows of the offices of Papa Ratzy. It negotiated the rancid atmosphere and filtered, hesitantly, onto Lew Roller's grubby desktop.

Papa Ratzy had been such a great idea, but before he knew it, he was head down in the murky depths of British politics, assuming there were un-murky depths available as an option. And that tramp down in Margate had been so intimidating. It seemed like the office and its impenetrable aromas was the best bet.

But now, he was regretting not heading off to Scotland with Mick and Jim. He had lots of food in the fridge, an endless supply of bourbon and a toilet that, more or less, worked. But after the adrenalin rush, caused by the fact that he might be assassinated at any moment, had worn off, life had become so *boring*.

He could've phoned Mick and Jim, but didn't fancy tales of the glamorous life they were having on the film set. And the after-wrap parties! He'd heard all about those. What he'd give for champagne, starlets and the odd orgy!

Eventually, it became *so* boring, he did something he hadn't done for years. He unpacked his old camera and lenses.

He spent an unhappy afternoon photographing the scum on his office chair, the stale milk stains on the filing cabinet and something unspeakable smeared across the front of the 2002 Pirelli calendar.

It was just after this, that Fate's face started to crack into a faint smile, which would eventually, over the next week or so, turn into high-volume, joyous, eyeball-popping laughter.

It had been a hot day. The extraction fan had broken down. The putrid gaseous levels in the room were horrendous and rising. He'd retched twice into the waste paper basket, and only the fear of being shot stopped him opening the window.

Then the penny dropped. He *could* open the window, even lean out, if he pretended to be photographing things. With the camera held up to his face, he'd be unrecognisable and, therefore, un-assasinatable.

So that's what he did.

The air in Greek Street, which a government survey had just confirmed was just short of 60 per cent diesel fumes, smelt beautiful.

He breathed in deeply and moved the camera randomly around, for five minutes.

Then, he accidentally took a photograph of someone in the street below and, with that, Fate's face broke into a broad grin.

He must have taken a dozen shots of people, mainly coming in and out of the massage parlour downstairs. Nothing spectacular, mainly the tops of their heads.

Eventually, he got fed up and stopped, particularly as he realised that a hit man with a good telescopic sight, would've been able to get a couple of glimpses of him and was probably lining up a shot. So he closed the window and turned the latches.

He meandered over to his desk and sat down. He looked aimlessly around the office wondering what to do next. At this point, Fate started digging him in the ribs and telling him to get a move on.

This prompted the idea that would change everything.

He took a look at his computer and decided to ignore the moist, yellow and green film that covered the keyboard. He thought it'd be fun to download his recent photographs and email them to his old paparazzi agent in New York, just to waste the arrogant bastard's time. He knew it was a futile gesture, as the agent had once referred to him as a limp-dicked, talentless scumbag, and in front of his mother, too.

And so, as Fate was ignoring Mick's wolf-capturing brain-wrack, it was also contemplating a massive and totally unexpected success for Lew's half-hearted, Greek Street endeavours.

The New York agent had been out when the emails arrived, but his assistant thought they looked unusual and interesting. She forwarded them, immediately, to Steinbecks, a premier arthouse photographic boutique and exhibition space on East 42nd Street.

The woman at Steinbecks thought they were sensational.

As soon as the agent came back into the office and was told what had happened, he swung into action. He was in the process of firing his assistant, when the call from Steinbecks came through.

When he realised the crap Lew had emailed was appreciated by a leading boutique, he told Steinbecks he was always on the look-out for exciting, fresh people - and this was the result. They offered their effusive congratulations. They were convinced a major talent had been discovered and they would be planning an exhibition, as soon as possible.

The agent rehired his assistant with a substantial raise, and looked forward to the exhibition, which was to be called *The tops of people's heads coming in and out of a UK massage parlor*. Very *avant garde*. Just what the A-listers loved.

When the exhibition was held, there were many eager buyers, but Steinbecks had agreed to suspend sales. Mainly because people with connections to the Guggenheim Museum had also seen the photographs, and thought they'd be just right for a big splash to start their Autumn Season.

The agent phoned Lew and, once the enormous amounts of cash were mentioned, old animosities vanished in a flash.

Lew was asked to shoot more of the same. So, he fired off 40 more shots in the next half hour, and emailed them over.

At the Guggenheim exhibition, requests to buy exceeded all expectations.

The photographs sold to wealthy international collectors for 50,000 dollars. And once the news of the exhibition reached the mainstream media, the price for an exceptional shot, where nothing was in focus, reached a healthy quarter of a million.

Lew Roller basked in the success. All those years of failure and abuse - and now his nondescript, badly composed, badly lit, out-of-focus trash that used to come back from the chemist with stickers containing helpful tips, had made his fortune.

As Mick and Jim later reflected, Lew's photographs *were* truly unique. No one could be that awful in so many departments. It had become the thing among the international jet set to own a Roller, and if you really had the cash - two.

Fate could sit back, put its feet on the table, and congratulate itself on a job well done.

58

Back in the Quagmire Keep kitchen, as far as Mick Barton was concerned, Fate could sit back and take a kip on the AGA hotplate for all he bloody well cared. He was getting no help at all.

How to capture four wild, aggressive, bloodthirsty wolves on his own? Jim and Cecil had pronounced themselves out of the equation, as they'd developed an allergy to wolf fur, not to mention wolf teeth enamel.

Mick gazed at the table top and swilled the *Glencoe M* around in his glass.

After a while, the whisky in his glass stayed still and his head swilled around. It was one of those sessions.

The good news was that both Twinkle's cage and the spare cage had a towing brackets and wheels, which could be flipped into place to make them roadworthy.

The bad news was that his first idea was to tow the spare cage into the forest where he would add a previously constructed, *papier mâché*, female wolf. This would be used to lure the wolves into the cage. But he'd looked it up on the net. They wouldn't be sexually mature for another six months, and anyway some of them might be female, as well. Wolf LGBTQQO+ issues were not ones he felt inclined to contemplate, and anyway, he was no good at *papier mâché*. At infant school, he had various attempts to make farmyard animals, and they all ended up looking like rotting footballs.

Another idea was to record the sound of wolves howling, then playback the recording in the cage and attract them that way. But Twinkle was asleep, and anyway Mick was pretty sure he didn't howl on demand.

So they went into the bathroom, to get a bit of echo, and Mick did the howling. After two excruciating minutes, Jim suggested they end the experiment. Mick hadn't got a wolf howl in him. That was not quite true. Jim remembered several nights when Mick had managed a good five minutes of plaintive howling outside the 3Ls, when the pub was closed for renovation work.

In the end, he went for the simple answer.

He put on his huntsman's wig and beard, grabbed Cecil's keys off the table, removed some steaks from the AGA's slow oven, popped them in a carrier bag and went downstairs. He backed Cecil's Jeep up to the towing bar of the spare cage so thoughtfully provided by the men from Cowdenbeath. Then, he flicked the wheels up into travel mode, and was ready to go.

When Mick reached the edge of the forest, he backed the cage close to the spot where Jim had had his close encounter, and disconnected it. He then drove the Jeep to a layby half a mile away, and began the walk back.

When he arrived at the cage, he acted quickly. He didn't want the wolves poking their teeth into the situation while he was setting up. Not that there was much to it.

He pushed the door wide open and tied some fishing line to it, threw the steaks inside, payed out the line into some undergrowth and began to hollow out the ground with a ladle he'd pinched from the kitchen.

This could be a long night ahead. So, to make sure he was able to relieve himself without giving away his position, he took a few seconds to fix an empty *Glencoe M* bottle

to his appendage, with duct tape. It was dark, and the tape was very sticky. He thought about damage this might do to his delicate but underused parts, and was all too aware of Copper Sporrán syndrome, but this was important, so, foolishly, gave it his best shot.

Soon, he'd wriggled himself and the empty bottle, into the hollow he'd created, and started brushing leaves over himself for extra camouflage.

He'd just finished brushing, when he heard a sound. They were here! No doubt about it. Maybe Fate wasn't such a badass after all. He twisted himself so he could use one eye to peer out from beneath the canopy of leaves. All four of them were there. They sniffed around the cage. Obviously, the delights of the AGA slow cooker were new to them, but they were definitely interested.

Equally obviously, they could all tell exactly where Mick was hiding. But there was no attack. They could smell Mick, but they could also smell residual Twinkle. None of them wanted a repeat of their last encounter. Nevertheless, their leader was determined to recover some pride. He padded over to where Mick lay. Even if Twinkle was around, he couldn't object to a little territory marking, so he peed over the mound of leaves. Nothing happened, no Twinkle hurtling out of the darkness, so the other three copied in slow succession. Mick had never fallen into a barrel of wolf urine, but could now guess what it must feel, smell and taste like.

When they'd all finished, he raised his head slightly and peered from underneath the dripping leaves. The AGA had won. They were all in the cage feasting on the slow-cooked steak.

Mick pulled the fishing line gently. The door clanged to. And that was that. All four in one go.

Apart from an extremely painful experience trying to remove the duct tape, it was just a case of fitting a couple of padlocks, then off to get the Jeep. As he limped back to the layby, on the off-chance, he called the wolf sanctuary in Norwood.

To his surprise, Percy answered.

'Percy, my old mucker,' said Mick, 'you're back! How was the honeymoon?'

'Great.'

'Where'd you go?'

'Margate.'

'Wonderful,' said Mick. 'Hey, Percy! Want to hear some good news? I've got four wolves all packaged up and ready for delivery, tomorrow morning. The sanctuary won't have to close.'

Percy was overjoyed.

'That's great news, Michael; I really thought it was all over. But there's a bit of a snag. I promised the wife, that, whatever happened, I'd give the wolf sanctuary up, for good.'

Mick gulped, but kept up the *bonhomie*.

'I'm sure you can sweet talk her round.'

'Reckon I can,' said Percy. There was no disguising his pleasure and enthusiasm. 'I'll have a chat with her over our midnight cocoa.'

The screams generated by the chat could be heard all over Norwood. Not that anyone responded. In Norwood, midnight screams were considered normal. Although some people expressed mild surprise at the amount of crockery that was being smashed.

What was definitely *not* normal was how Ethel moved out the next morning and immediately filed for divorce, citing incompatibility and revolting table manners, involving an artificial insemination pipette.

*

When he arrived at the Keep, Mick reversed the cage round the back. Best to keep a low profile.

Amazingly, after ten minutes, Viceroy's driver arrived from the *Manchester Gleaner*.

It was going like clockwork.

As they connected the tow bar and tied the builders' tarpaulin over the cage, Mick noticed that Twinkle was sat in his own cage, looking rather forlorn.

And no wonder. Four wolves were being taken away to somewhere. Twinkle had always thought there was a chance of them becoming his pack, here in the Scottish forests. And what fun they could have with hikers, holidaymakers, boy scouts, ecologists - endless entertainment and a varied diet. Plus there were a couple of good-looking females.

Now they were going, and he had no idea where. He was alone, again. His heart was heavy, if not broken. He slumped down, put his head on his paws and whimpered, quietly. He was just discovering the hard way, that Fate had a department known as Sod's Law for Wolves.

59

The next day morning was bright and fresh. Jim and Cecil were delighted, not to say amazed, with the news that the four wolves were already on their way to Norwood, and Percy was back from honeymoon and ready to take over.

They were so delighted, they cooked full English breakfasts.

Mick was, effectively, the guest of honour. And why not? No wolves meant Jim felt his throat was less likely to be ripped out, and Cecil could hit his shooting schedules, such as they were.

'Here's the revised script,' he said, plonking it down on the table. 'Busy day today.'

And it was.

*

Cecil strutted around the forest clearing. After a few awkward questions about the stench in the Jeep, he got on to film making.

'Now a lot of this will take place at night,' he said. 'We'll shoot "day for night", and you can use torches to see your way through the undergrowth.'

'That won't be historically accurate,' said Jim, 'this story must be at least a couple of hundred years old - torches and all that.'

'Look,' said Cecil, with a thwack of his riding crop, 'I know these fuckers - sorry, I understand our audience demographics - and they don't give a flying anything about historical accuracy. We made a great film - *Old Gory* - about a gang of psychopaths running riot through both sides in the American Civil War - you know, to just to add a bit more blood and guts to the action. There were iPads, passing jumbo jets, condom machines, Micky Mouse watches, all in shot - and tell you what, we didn't have one complaint from the fans. Microsoft and Disney got a bit sniffy, but we hired "Bullhorn" McCloud and that soon shut them up.'

'So, no worries about torches! And shooting "day for night" will be fine, not to mention moody and cheap. See, if no one can tell what's going on, we can dub dialogue 'cos no one can see your lips move, and we don't have to piss about choreographing the action, plus we'll have lots of confusing, hand-held, blurry camera movement. See, 'cos we have torches, the fans get dramatic, brightly illuminated splashes of blood - they love it! Everything is in their minds. Not that I'd want to get any further into their minds that we are at present. What they do outside on the streets when they've seen our movies is up to them.'

So, with these comforting words, shooting began.

The script made no sense. Mick and Jim were used to shooting corporate videos 'from the hip.' But this was crazy. Still, for 40,000 dollars each, they would, as with most people connected with the corporate video industry, do anything.

They started by Jim filming Mick the Huntsman chopping wood and swinging his axe at head height so that green-screen victims could be added back in LA. Then, Mick shot more footage of Twinkle in unusual situations such as peeping round corners, sliding down the cottage roof, and trying to urinate up a drainpipe.

They filmed close-up facial expressions of each other - horror, terror, extreme pain, shock, dismay and anguish.

However, darting around, shouting largely obscene dialogue to the direction of a fully jodhpured-up madman, while keeping control of a large wolf was exhausting. Especially as Mick had to cope with Twinkle's bouts of 'where's my wolf pack gone' depression. These could usually be cured by a couple of pounds of prime steak. The only trouble was that Twinkle realised that posh grub was delivered, every time he laid down and whined.

'He must have put on 50 pounds, today,' said Jim. 'He'll look fatter, then thinner, in different scenes.'

'Reference Dorothy's hair length in the *Wizard of Oz*,' said Mick.

'Or Bridget Bardot's hairstyle, shot to shot, in *Shalako*,' said Jim.

'Director, Edward Dmytryk - 1968,' said Mick.

'Producer, Euan Lloyd, and music, Robert Farnon,' countered Jim.

'Well done that nymphet!' said Mick.

'Miss Bardot's hair by...'

The horn on the Jeep sounded in one long blast.

Cecil was announcing that, not only was he in danger of being asphyxiated by the stench of wolf urine, but it was also a wrap for the day.

*

When they got back to the Keep, they were knackered.

Mick fed Twinkle, then they climbed the stairs where they had another full English breakfast for their evening meal. They would've fancied a nice steak with all the trimmings, but steak supplies were running low, and they would be needed to keep Twinkle's spirits up, tomorrow.

Within an hour, they were all out like lights.

*

The next day was also bright and fresh.

'I thought it was supposed to piss down all the time in Scotland,' mumbled Jim, as they loaded the gear, along with Twinkle and the last of the steak supplies into the cars.

'Can I just direct your worries from regional precipitation to the fact that today, your dialogue will involve you talking to Twinkle when we've got him dressed up as a grandma, in bed with a shawl, bonnet and *pinz nez*. And that, if he gets nasty, you'll be nearest to him. Can I also direct your attention to the lines, "Oh grandma what big teeth you've got." Or as it says in Cecil's re-interpretation, "Shit dude, that's some motherfuckin' molars you're packin'.'"

As it turned out, even Mick and his steaks couldn't get Twinkle to perform.

Eventually, he drove back to the Keep to get the corrugated iron sheet.

Once the corrugated iron had been slipped between the bed sheets, and as Twinkle had entered a Leader of the Pack depression period, he stayed still long enough to get the shot. Admittedly, he'd ripped the bonnet and shawl to shreds before agreeing to cooperate. Plus there was no way, Castrol 10W-30 or no Castrol 10W-30, that Mick was

going to try and balance Miss Dribble's spare *pince-nez* above the beast's slaverling jaws. It wasn't because they were her spare pair, it was just that he didn't have a spare hand.

Anyway, Cecil said they could put the shawl, bonnet and *pince-nez* on in post-production, back in L.A. And maybe Little Green McRiding Hood could discover the wolffy grandma at night, with all the shocks delivered by torchlight.

They finished the day with a few catch-up shots. Several shots of Mick bursting through the cottage door with an axe and a longish scene where Jim had to strip off and have a bath in a tin tub, in front of the fire. Needless to say, he'd objected.

'Don't worry about a damn thing,' said Cecil, 'we'll use a body-double for nearly all the nude shots.'

Jim launched another protest. Mick interrupted.

'It'll be dark.'

'*Correcto*,' smiled Cecil.

Jim gave a resigned shrug. He might as well act like a professional. It was the last shot of the day. In fact, it was the last shot of the film. So bollocks to it!

*

The hill-side was dew-pearled

The lark was on the wing

The snail was on the thorn

The Twinkle was in his cage

Mick and Jim were eating their second full English of the day

Cecil had loaded the Jeep

God was in His heaven

And all was right with the world!

The atmosphere in the kitchen could best be described as slightly buoyant.

'Well guys,' said Cecil, 'it's been a pleasure working with you. Got to get me to Aberdoon Airport and hitch a ride to the City of Angels, *and* if you'll permit me to say, *Yee-haa!*

To Mick and Jim, the 'Yee-haa!' sounded a little like 'Thank fuck!' But they took it in good spirits.

'I'll make sure your cash is wired to you the minute I get back.'

'Er, just a moment,' said Mick, 'couldn't you make a call and transfer the cash, now?'

'Hey, easy on,' said Cecil, 'I OK'd the money with my backer. You probably don't know about him. His name is Rory MacHeinkel III - safe as houses, or should I say oil wells.'

He turned on his heels and, with a final thwack of his riding crop, Cecil Beader of *Haemoglobin Productions* was gone.

Mick and Jim looked at each other. Mac-fucking-3! They should have known!

What they couldn't have known was that soon, the Keep's doorbell would ring ushering in a scenario full of innocence, lust, deception, danger and sudden death. A

scenario that, even Mac3, once he'd been threatened with a branding iron, would willingly admit was way out of his league.

60

Five minutes after Cecil left, there was, indeed, a ring at the door.

‘Probably forgotten his jodhpur press,’ mumbled Mick.

Jim could see Mick wasn’t going to move out of his chair, so he got up and ambled down the stairs.

He opened the door, and was amazed. Instead of the return of the lunatic Mac3 *protégé*, there was the sound of a lush orchestra playing soaring cadenzas in the fresh, Scottish night air.

This background brain music was being provided for a beautiful young woman wearing hiking gear - a bobble hat, red anorak, blue jeans and walking boots. Jim fell instantly in love. She was slim and had big beautiful eyes, pink lips and golden plaits. There was no doubt, she was a stunner, and Jim had been specifically chosen by God to open the front door for her.

‘Good evening,’ she said. Jim nearly keeled over. Her voice had a lush, husky tone and a hint of a foreign accent.

‘My name is Heidi and I am a little lost and looking for a breakfast and bed. You do?’

Did Jim do, or did he do?

He thought about answering with a beautifully constructed sentence - eloquence personified. But he was smart enough to realise the impact she was having on his body, particularly the part of his brain that controlled speech.

So he said, ‘Up ‘ere.’

She followed him up the stairs. His heart was pounding, his spindly legs were wobbling, he wanted to sing a song that would travel across the universe to enlighten distance galaxies with the magnificence of true love in its purist form. But mostly, he concentrated on how he was going to introduce Heidi to Mick without sounding like a slaving pervert.

As it was, she saved him the embarrassment, by giving Mick the same set of introductory sentences she’d given Jim at the front door.

‘Pull up a chair,’ said Mick. ‘Coffee?’

Heidi said she was freezing and that would be lovely.

Jim sat quietly and wondered why he hadn’t thought of saying that. Then sought consolation by imagining himself as a cross between James Bond and one of Miss Dribble’s bare-chested, swashbuckling heroes, with testosterone levels so high, his GP would send him to a specialist for tests. Eventually, Jim convinced himself that someone with his animal magnetism would not stoop to talking about chairs and coffee.

‘We have a tower bedroom that’s available,’ said Mick, ‘if you’d like to see it.’

Before Heidi could say, yes, Jim said, ‘I’ll show her.’

He turned and headed manfully out of the kitchen door, with a bemused Heidi in pursuit.

Jim showed her the accommodation, without adding ‘recently rebuilt’ or ‘sorry about the smell of wet cement.’ But there was no need to go into details.

‘This is perfect.’

She threw her haversack on the bed.

‘I just change now. You have food here?’

‘Yes, yes, yes,’ said Jim.

‘How much I pay you?’

‘Oh, that won’t be necessary, you can stay as long as you like, for free.’

Jim was deeper in love than he’d ever been. It was instant, and it was glorious. He went back down the stairs in a daze.

In the kitchen, Mick was scratching his belly with a fish knife.

‘I can tell you’re smitten, old boy.’

‘Smitten, smitten,’ Jim almost yelled. ‘She’s the most fabulous woman I’ve ever seen in my life.’

‘Must be quite something,’ said Mick, ‘I can remember you used to see lots of fabulous women down the 3Ls, at closing time.’

‘No, this is different. This girl is the one!’

‘Can’t say “girl” nowadays,’ said Mick, triumphantly standing the fish knife upright in his belly button, ‘I believe the politically correct term is oestrogen-controlled humanoid.’

Jim was not to be stopped.

‘She’s fantastic - everything I’ve ever dreamed of. I’m going to cook her a fabulous meal tonight.’

Jim thought of Moroccan quail with rose-petal sauce and cucumber relish, then he thought of baked lobster with smoked salmon *blinis*, caviar and *crème fraîche*.

Then he got a bit more realistic.

‘Suppose I could knock up a full English?’

‘Include me in,’ said Mick. ‘You never know, she might enjoy sampling traditional foreign food. I presume she’s from overseas?’

‘Yes,’ said Jim, ‘but I can’t place the accent.’

‘Well, get a move on then, I just had a call from Miss Dribble. She’s about an hour away.’

*

When Heidi had changed, she came down into the kitchen. She looked even more gorgeous. She was wearing a long, red, silk dress and a shoulder bag covered with embroidered poppies.

Over the full English, Jim just gawped at her - with levels of adoration most people would’ve been embarrassed to put on public display, particularly if there were psychoanalysts present.

Mick, as usual, chatted away. He didn’t ask too many questions, but said how they’d been working on a film. He also said that he thought Quagmire Keep was an historic piece of architecture with a huge whiskey store, down in the basement - adding that the owner, Miss Dribble, would be back fairly soon.

Jim de-gawped himself enough to ask Heidi where she was from.

‘Oh!’ she replied, ‘I am from Sicily.’

‘But you’re called Heidi?’

‘Heidi is popular name in my family. My mother and father like *Heidi*, the old black and white film with Shirley Temple.’

‘Oh, right,’ said Jim, ‘1937, directed by Allan Dwan, stereo sound, and what’s your second name?’

‘I’ll tell you later,’ she said, and blew Jim a kiss.

As he was passing out from an overactive delirium gland, the doorbell rang.

‘It’ll be Old Dribblepus,’ said Mick, ‘I’ll get it.’

Mick opened the front door. Miss Dribble was straight in.

‘Good evening Michael, and I suppose you two naughty boys have been gallivanting all night down the *Copper Sporrán*.’

Before Mick could reply, there was an unnecessary eruption of extremely slobbery kisses.

Mick broke free by forcing himself into a series of desperate sneezing fits, after which, despite not knowing any wrestling arm-locks, he managed to guide her onto the stairs.

He then steered her away from what he was sure would be an extended bout of gross sexual activity on the carpetless stairs by blurting out that a paying guest had just arrived. It did the trick.

‘Jolly good show,’ said Miss Dribble semi-breezily. ‘Nary a problem-ette!’ Then added with a now-famous leer, ‘Melisa can wait ’til later!’

When she arrived in the kitchen, Jim stepped forward. He was blushing.

‘This is Heidi,’ he said, with hardly a stutter.

‘And you are Miss Dribble?’ Heidi asked, politely.

‘Yes.’

‘The last of the Campbell clan who built this Keep?’

‘Yes,’ said Miss Dribble, with a puzzled look on her face.

‘Good, then my trip from Sicily was worth it.’

And with that, Heidi put her hand in the shoulder bag with the embroidered flowers, and pulled out a large revolver.

61

‘Sit down at the table and shut the fuck up,’ said Heidi.

They sat down at the table and shut the fuck up.

Heidi then tore off her wig and ripped the velcroed front of her dress, to reveal a t-shirt, jeans, climbing boots and the fact that she was a man.

He took garden ties from the shoulder bag and tied the astonished trio’s hands behind their backs.

‘This whisky place in basement, take me to it, now.’

Mick, Jim and Miss Dribble needed no additional encouragement.

Once they’d arrived, he moved them to the far end where Old Lob handled the deliveries. He got them to sit down, and used more garden ties to secure their legs and fix them to a cast iron post.

Mick, Jim and even Miss Dribble decided this was not the time to speak.

The so-recently-Heidi person sat on a crate. He pointed the gun at them as a way of getting attention, then spoke.

‘My name is Carlos. This is good day for me - and very bad day for you. I no need tell you, but I proud of what I achieve - for me, my international business associates and family back home in Sicily. Of course, in few minutes, you all dead, but no hurt if I tell of my brilliance.’

‘You heard of my esteamy colleague and boss, Vito “Teflon” Abbatelli.’

Shit, thought Mick, he’s the hit man!

‘Some paparazzi pigs take shot of Vito with famous House of Lourdes person when he enter UK, illegally, with some, Zizi Big Chest film star. When photograph go worldwide, it publicised very large, very secret business deal. Vito no like million-dollar business deal getting the cancel. So soon, he find out *you* two took nasty picture.’

‘I was sat in the car,’ blurted out Jim. ‘I told him not to do it.’

Carlos, as judge, jury and, presumably, executioner, ignored the plea.

‘I know you two took photograph ‘cos on back it say Papa Ratzy – with name Lew Roller.’

‘Lew’s not ...?’ said Jim.

‘No,’ said Carlos, ‘but only matter of time.’

‘Anyways, Don Abbatelli, put out contract on you two and Lew person. His computer guys hack your emails and *Evvin!* There it is! They tell you try hide in this Glencoe dump place - address, dates, times - everything Carlos need for good hit.’

‘So I fly over. Had skinny boy here in sights, but I miss. Then I import ancestral cannon from Sicily. What good is being hit man if you can’t have fun. Cool shot eh! Then bastards steal cannon. I go *Copper Sporrán* next morning for teacake for - how you say - constellation. Old waitress tell Carlos Quagmire Keep owned by Miss Melissa Dribble, last known descendent of swine of swines, Ezekiel Campbell.’

'*Fantastico!* Carlos no believe luck. Dribble person been on family back burner for years, but now, she right on front.'

'What have I got to do with anything?' asked Miss Dribble.

'Look lady person, Carlos is Sicilian. And you know about revenge, vendettas and family honour, and if you don't, you about to find out.'

'My full name is Carlos MacDonaldini. Family left Scotland for Sicily in 1692, a few weeks after famous massacre. You last of Campbells who built this Keep. You die and family honour satisfied.'

'So I arrive as Heidi and wait for you. Fortunately, I didn't have long wait. Is good thing. Mr Sticky Insect, here, is making dishonourable sexual advances to Carlos. As if! What happen to your last girlfriend, Romeo, she crawl back into sea?'

Carlos drew himself up to his full height, and, despite the pale-pink lip-gloss, managed to curl his lips into a sinister sneer.

'So what we going to do now, ladies or gentlemen?'

'I could shoot you. But this *Sicilian* revenge. It have style, class and carefully thought-through historical perspective.'

He put his hand in the embroidered shoulder bag and pulled out a black metal sphere about eight inches in diameter. Unfortunately, it also had what looked like fuse poking out of the top.

'This is bomb, but not just ordinary bomb. Is very old design - as near as Carlos could get to date of Glencoe Massacre. Poetic Sicilian justice, eh?'

'How did you get it through Customs?' said Jim.

Mick butted in with what he judged to be a more pertinent question.

'Are you going to blow us up?'

'Poetic Sicilian justice,' repeated Carlos, 'no choice. I return to joyous family and get promoted by Don Abbatelli, perhaps with big bonus and even go live in New York.'

Carlos rummaged in his shoulder bag.

'This is fuse extension. I fit it, then ten minutes before bang. Give me time to drive off and disappear into miserable Scottish countryside.'

Carlos took out a cigarette lighter to light the fuse, which was about a yard long. Unfortunately for the captive trio, it spluttered into life.

'Goodbye,' said Carlos. And, stuffing a couple of bottles of *Glencoe M* into his shoulder bag, he spun on his heels and left.

There was a few seconds stunned silence before Mick spoke.

'We gotta think, and think fast. I've been thinking flat out since the bastard ripped off his dress.'

'And what've you come up with?' asked Jim.

'Nothing.'

The bomb was about ten feet away. The fuse was fizzing merrily.

'At least, he left the lights on,' said Jim.

'I'm frightened,' said Miss Dribble.

'We're all frightened,' said Mick. 'We've just got to sodding do something.'

The conversation could well have limped along in this pathetic way until lights out time.

However, minds were suddenly concentrated by a small scratching noise, coming from the delivery trap doors, above their heads and to the left.

They'd no idea what it was, but it raised their hopes. Slightly.

But basically, they knew they had no chance - ten-minute fuse, tied up tightly, no way out.

And they could be excused for thinking such depressing thoughts. But it was a pity they hadn't factored in the help they could get from the activities of Norwood Comprehensive School's Class 6B.

62

The scratching on the delivery doors grew louder, and then there came the sound of frenzied whimpering.

'Shit,' shouted Mick, 'Twinkle's out!'

'Here, Twinkle boy, it's me, Mick. Your best friend Mick. Try and get the doors open.'

Mick was excited.

'He must have gnawed through the padlocks on his cage. I transferred three of his locks to the cage with the four wolves - so they didn't get an unexpected burst of freedom in the fast lane of the M1.

The delivery hatch doors were heavy and virtually horizontal. Opening them was going to be impossible. This was because Mick was thinking that Twinkle lacked the human dexterity, spatial awareness and motor skills needed. What he hadn't taken account of was that Twinkle weighed 200 pounds, was very strong and had a foul temper if things weren't going his way.

It took about a minute for him to rip the delivery hatch doors off their hinges.

He looked down into the warehouse and howled with delight at the sight of Mick.

But he couldn't get in. There was a bolted security grill covering the hatch – half-inch thick steel bars. Even Twinkle couldn't gnaw through those in seven minutes.

Mick's thought so hard, his brain hurt. And the same went for Jim and Miss Dribble.

Another two precious minutes went by - nothing.

Mick's life flashed before his eyes. It wasn't very pleasant. Apart from a Dan Dare mobile that had once hung over his cot, the rest consisted of abject failure, devious dealings, alcoholic poisoning, betrayal, death threats, blackmail, aggressive wives and a dearth of intimate contacts with women.

Then, suddenly, the flashing stopped and rewound rapidly. He paused on a recent tale Percy Spearmint had told him at the wolf sanctuary. Twinkle had once urinated over a group of gobby local schoolboys, and he'd already proved, up at the cannon site, that he had a truly spectacular capacity and range. The old bomb had a fizzing fuse. Twinkle was up high. It might just be possible, if he was riled enough. The question was; how riled did Norwood Comprehensive School's Class 6B, make him?

Without thinking too long about that question, Mick started riling.

'Twinkle,' he shouted, 'you're useless, you big baby, you couldn't fight your way out of a paper bag.'

Absolutely no reaction.

Mick decided to up the ante.

'Twinkle, you useless bag of shite, you big fucking baby-faced wanker, you couldn't fight your fucking way out a bag full of fucking jelly babies. Call yourself a fucking wolf, you mamby-fucking-pamby micro-dick on legs!'

Miss Dribble joined in.

'Twinkle, you're an absolute bounder!'

Jim did too.

‘Twinkle, Alpha male my arse, I’ve seen bigger bollocks on a mosquito!’

While initially wondering where the ‘Hello, Twinkle, my old mate’ stuff had gone, Twinkle soon began to be affected by the content and tone of this three pronged, foul-mouthed tirade.

Memories of the abuse delivered during the Class 6B incident started flooding into the mass of bone and gristle that, so often, acted as Twinkle’s brain.

He became cross at the memory. And, as the insults continued, particularly the one about being an absolute bounder, he became enraged. He would’ve leapt down into the cellar and killed the three of them, if it weren’t for the bars. But then, it dawned. He could attack *through* the bars - just like he’d done with those shits from 6B. He knew his range and power, and how unhappy the schoolboys had been, with the soaked clothes, the stench and the fact that some had to go the local A&E for precautionary shots.

As more vivid memories of the 6B incident were re-ignited, Twinkle became increasingly agitated and started to howl. The insults kept coming. They took over his whole being. It was time for revenge. He snarled. He screamed into the night air. And, most importantly, for the cellar’s occupants, he raised his leg.

Yes, Twinkle had snapped.

The three captives were amazed at the amount and distance of Twinkle’s stream of urine. In fact, stream was too mild a descriptor; it was more like he had a power wash wand between his legs.

At first, he concentrated on splattering Mick, Jim and Miss Dribble, and did very well. They looked as though they’d fallen into the deep end of a not-very-well-maintained swimming pool.

But you could have too much of a good thing, and Twinkle began to look for other targets. He noticed the spherical piece of scrap iron, on the floor, with the sparkly light coming out of the top. It wasn’t much, but it would have to do.

Mick recognised there must have been about a minute left on the fuse, when Twinkle gave his bladder one last mighty squeeze and hit the bomb dead centre. Three hearts were in three mouths as the spray rose into the air, then began to clear. To everyone’s relief, the fuse sputtered, flared slightly, spluttered, then died.

Everyone began to shout.

‘Fantastic shot, Twinkle!’

‘Good boy, Twinkle!’

‘Twinkle, I love you!’

‘Absolute corker!’

‘Twinkle you are the *best!*’

Twinkle looked down through the grill at the gently dripping people and their happy upturned faces. But he was extremely confused. First it was super Twinkle, then it was fucking bastard Twinkle, now it was back to super Twinkle. He’d had enough.

He turned, howled at the moon for a final time, then padded off back to his cage. His mind was made up - he’d spend some time quietly gnawing on one of his pieces of scrap iron, until he got himself back on an even keel.

63

The trio hadn't had time to get their breath back, when two people wearing balaclavas and carrying sub-machine guns, burst into the warehouse and ran towards them.

They skidded to a halt on the remains of Twinkle's magnificent, micturational endeavours.

Before Mick, Jim or Miss Dribble could even scream, they whipped off their balaclavas. Despite the combat fatigues, to Mick and Jim, they seemed vaguely familiar.

'Awfully nice to see you again,' said the man.

'Everyone OK?' said the young woman.

'It's, it's - the tramp from Margate,' stuttered Mick.

And Penny, that new waitress from the *Copper Sporrán*, said Jim.

While Penny was quickly cutting them free, the tramp spoke.

'When you've finished, Penny, be a dear and defuse the bomb, just to make sure. We'll take it back to the lab for analysis.'

He turned to the trio, who were now sitting on whisky crates, rubbing their sore wrists and thinking how wonderful it was to be alive.

'I suppose you're wondering what we're doing here,' said the tramp.

'And I suppose, you're wondering why we smell so awful,' said Mick.

'Yes,' said the tramp, retching slightly, 'it might be an idea to get cleaned up before we have a chat. And don't worry about Carlos MacDonaldini, we know him. He couldn't find his buttocks with both hands in his back pockets. And, anyway, he'll have driven right into the clutches of my back-up squad.'

'Is he OK?' asked Jim.

The tramp's radio crackled. He put it to his ear and listened intently, then nodded.

'From what I've just heard, he's no longer a danger to the public, or anyone.'

'You mean...?'

'Remember, Little Lenny's Jellied Eel Stall, in Margate, when I said we were a lot bigger, a lot cleverer, a lot more unpleasant *and* better shots? Well, tonight, apparently, we proved it.'

*

They sat around the kitchen table, minus Miss Dribble, who had decided that the less she knew about all this, the better. The tramp also thought this was a good idea, given Miss Dribble's propensity to write novels about anything she came across in real life.

They'd showered and put their Twinkled clothes into black plastic bags, ready for the wash.

'So,' said Mick, 'how come you knew we were here - with Nastyboy Carlos?'

'Well,' said the tramp, 'even at the Margate stage, we were busy monitoring the communications of Vito "Teflon" Abbatelli and his associates, especially the international hit men. Within 48 hours, we'd, how shall I put it - Vito was in custody and we'd

eliminated - two possible assassins. But Carlos MacDonaldini was still on the loose. We soon found out he knew you were heading for Quagmire Keep, and we guessed it'd only be a matter of time before he made the trip over from Sicily.'

'Immediately, we despatched the lady known as Penny - one of our top operatives - to work undercover as a waitress in the *Copper Sporrán*, which is renowned for its sublime tea cakes and being Glencoe Gossip Central.'

'When you met her in that establishment, she managed to place two electronic tags, so we could keep track of you. She set up the surveillance, satellite-tracking screens in her bedroom at the Ballachulish Bed and Breakfast establishment.'

'Later on, when Carlos popped in for a tea cake, Penny recognised him from our database and tagged him, so we could keep tabs on him too. Not that it was that difficult, as he had the bedroom next to Penny. I ask you, three quarters of a million pounds in surveillance equipment, and all she needed was a wine glass pressed up against the wall. Still, it soon became clear that things were beginning to hot up, so, this morning, I arrived by helicopter, along with a fully armed back-up team, and we started to plan our moves.'

'But Carlos disguised himself as Heidi,' said Jim, 'so presumably, Heidi didn't have a tag.'

'Ah, so that's what happened,' said the tramp. 'It was all going well, when, suddenly, the screens showed him static, on the edge of the forest, about 200 yards from here.'

'That's because he changed into his Heidi gear,' said Jim - he paused to gaze forlornly into the middle-distance - 'so he must have left the tagged Carlos stuff in his car and walked to the Keep.'

'That's when we got really suspicious and decided to stake-out the road leading to this magnificent building. But we didn't see much, until a few minutes ago, when Carlos came hurtling along the road. I left the stand-by team to deal with him, and Penny and I dashed over here.'

'So, Carlos nearly slipped through the net, and we nearly got blown up,' said Jim in a slightly aggressive tone.

Mick realised it might not be a good idea for Jim to upset the tramp, what with him having 'people', so he decided on a jovial interruption.

'Still, what's done is done and all's well that ends well. There are lots of questions we could ask, but as responsible citizens, I feel it's our duty to respect the confidences of a secret organisation dedicated to upholding the centuries-old values of our great island nation and protecting the safety and integrity of the realm, don't you James?'

Jim nodded and muttered 'creep.'

Just then, Miss Dribble arrived back in the kitchen, and, not having heard Mick's creep soliloquy, asked a question. Her confidence had returned.

'What about the *Glencoe Massacre* production and storage facility downstairs?'

'Oh,' said Penny, 'I wouldn't worry about that. According to the *Copper Sporrán* grapevine, everyone knows about it. Even the Inland Revenue. Old Lob apparently makes sure all Customs and Excise staff get a crate or two at Christmas and on bank holidays.'

Before she could ask any more questions, the tramp and Penny stood up.

‘Looks like we’re all sorted here,’ he said, ‘and you can get back on with your lives.’

‘I’ll go and give Twinkle a big thanks and a couple of pounds of raw liver,’ said Mick.

‘I’ll start packing,’ said Jim.

‘I feel another novel coming on,’ said Miss Dribble, ‘and I think I’ll make an appointment to go and see that nice young Jake in hospital. Maybe he could stay here and convalesce.’

Before Mick could issue a serious health and safety warning about that proposal, the tramp and Penny turned, waved and left.

Mick shot after them.

Half way down the stairs, he caught the tramp’s arm.

He lowered his voice to a whisper.

‘Could I have a brief word with you, sir?’

The tramp listened intently, then said, ‘Not a problem, my dear chap, not a problem.’

Outside, Mick could hear the beat of helicopter blades. He walked into the night air. The helicopter landed, and within 30 seconds, took off.

The lights tilted away down the glen, and eventually slipped up into the low cloud cover. Soon, there was no noise at all, just the wind doing what had always done.

It was the moment he knew that, after the dangers of freelancing for Papa Ratzy, their failure as social workers, the random death threats, the gallons of Perrier water, Miss Dribble’s lurid excesses, the disorientating *Glencoe M* experiences, random sniper fire, cannonball strikes, wolf attacks, vintage bombs and the unforgettable experience of starring in *Little Blood-Red McRiding Hood*, it was absolutely, certainly, and most definitely a wrap - well, almost.

64

Mick drove the Morris Traveller carefully up the ramp into the cavernous body of the Ilyushin 76. The huge cargo plane's jet engines emitted a low, expectant whine. On the passenger seat of the Morris lay the paperwork for the export of one wild wolf, Aberdeen to Talagi Airport, Arkhangelsk.

The paperwork had arrived in the nick of time, faxed to the on-site customs office by the tramp. Mick had dropped Jim off to catch the flight to London. Mick had asked if he wanted to come along, but Jim said he'd had enough of colder climes, and Archangel was probably below zero right now, so no thank you. Adding that he was answering the call of the two-bar electric fire in the office.

Mick turned round and told Twinkle not to worry. But he was asleep, despite having to leave his corrugated iron sheet back in Glencoe.

All this, from a quick conversation with the tramp, on the stairs of the Keep! It wasn't *what* you know, but *who* you know. The fact that Jim was the only person Mick *really* knew, was the obvious answer to why terrific freebies like this didn't happen more often, if at all.

Mick had taken a call from the tramp who'd explained how he'd put this amazing flight together. Apparently, he knew an old, aggressive, but slightly demented ex-KGB agent, called Boris Pasternak, who was now running a pizza restaurant in Lanzarote. Although he'd been fired from the Kremlin years ago, Boris still had a few bits of useful information up his sleeve.

It fell together like this. The tramp had compromising information on Boris, and Boris had compromising information on customs officials in both the UK and Russia, plus compromising photographs of leading military officers, taken in dubious Berlin nightclubs, many years ago, when they were just starting their careers.

So everyone was thoroughly compromised to perfection, and the flight was set up in minutes.

The Ilyushin doors closed, and soon they were airborne. Mick sat back in his seat, and opened a newspaper he'd bought in the airport shop. There was a big headline, *VISCOUNT CELTIC AHEAD IN POLL TO ELECT NEW PRIME MINISTER*. So, thought Mick, the tramp and, no doubt, Penny the machine-gun-toting waitress, would be happy with that.

Mick didn't know whether he was happy or sad, but he'd made up his mind to do this, and that was that.

*

The Ilyushin landed safely. Mick backed the Traveller out of the hold. Boris' compromising information must have been pretty spectacular, as all the soldiers on their way to the Talagi Airport customs house, saluted as he drove by.

He knew he had an hour's drive ahead of him. There was a light dusting of snow, but the Traveller had *Pirelli S* rally snow tyres fitted, so it should all go smoothly.

Certainly the customs clearance went smoothly. No one even bothered to check if Twinkle was on board. It was just salute after salute. Mick began to wonder if the pizza restaurant in Lanzarote was just a front.

The only problem had been earlier, when he went into the Glencoe Post Office and asked if they had any large-scale maps of the Archangel region. In fact, the old lady behind the counter had pressed the panic button. But the tramp had thought ahead and faxed over just what he needed.

Once they left the airport, Mick pulled over and got out of the car. He stood there for a few minutes to get the noise of the Ilyushin's jets out of his head.

It was cold. He could see his breath. The skies were leaden and a biting wind was blowing in from the Arctic. This was Russia!

He began the drive north. Strange he thought, that when he'd opened the car door, Twinkle woke up and suddenly started giving energised, little yelps. Maybe he knew something.

Soon they began to see patches of forest on the bleak landscape, and within ten minutes, they were surrounded by huge fir trees. Twinkle was getting more excited now, and let rip with the occasional howl.

Just ahead on the right, Mick could see a track leading into the forest, maybe one used by forest rangers. Although did they have forest rangers this far out in the wilds?

Nevertheless, he turned off onto the track and must have driven for a couple of miles, before pulling over. He was deep in the forest, now. The sky was darker. It was starting to snow. Large flakes began to swirl, making crazy patterns around what some might say was an even crazier idea.

Mick opened the twin doors at the back of the Traveller. Twinkle jumped out and gave the most amazing high volume howl. Then he rolled around in the snow, got to his feet and howled again.

'Bit better than Norwood, eh mate?' said Mick.

They began walking together through the rough ground at the side of the track. The dense forest was about 20 yards away.

Mick stopped, took out a handkerchief and blew his nose. This was it.

Twinkle trotted off to the edge of the forest. Then suddenly, he stopped as well. He turned round and came racing up to Mick. He jumped up with his front legs on Mick's shoulders and began snarling the most terrifying snarls. He barked and snapped his jaws, left and right within inches of Mick's face, for what seemed like an eternity. Certainly, eternity was where Mick thought he was heading.

Suddenly, Twinkle made a lunge for Mick's neck. There was a snap of jaws followed by a ripping sound, and it was all over.

Twinkle backed down and looked quietly up at the trembling, white face with the gibbering lips. He held the position for quite a long time, gazing deep into Mick's eyes. Mick was not inclined to move.

Then, if a wolf could give a wink and a wry smile, then that's just what Twinkle did.

Mick took a single, extremely deep breath, just to check his lungs were still inside his body.

And with that, Twinkle turned, and with the best part of Mick's tie in his mouth, padded off slowly into the forest, without looking back.

Mick turned as well, blew his nose, a trifle too loudly this time, and headed for the Morris.

Unlike Twinkle, he *did* look back, several times. But there was nothing to see. Just a wall of trees.

That, Mick decided, was how it should be.

He got in the Traveller, gave a little smile, turned the ignition key and made a three-point turn. Then with more than a lot of mixed feelings, and the rest of his tie stored safely in the glove compartment, he set off on the long journey back to the wilds of Greek Street.

THE END

And finally, thanks for reading Papa Ratzy.

If you'd like to write a short review of Papa Ratzy on amazon, here are the links and instructions.

For amazon.co.uk it's: <http://amzn.to/2lhDSjv>

For amazon.com it's: <http://amzn.to/2lcSCEV>

Just click on *customer reviews* to the right of the star ratings, then click on *Create your own review* - and off you go - please be kind!

Synopses and a selection of Amazon reader reviews

They Win. You Lose.

Sex, Violence & Songs from the Shows

Synopsis

Mick and Jim are on the run from Vlad and Vic, enforcers for international crime boss and Ealing comedy-lover, Charlie Sumkins. The chase involves frantic attempts to preserve their lives and reproductive organs. They battle inefficiently scheduled sex with Southsea's most colour-blind landlady, violent amateur dramatics and AK-47-wielding milliners.

They end up in Las Vegas, where, with cactus-punctured groins, they're pursued by Reservoir Dogs' lookalikes. Later, they go LSD tripping with the stars of Easy Rider, escape from Thelma and Louise wannabes, and make a commitment before a bourbon-fuelled Elvis impersonator, before the big, life-threatening sort-out in Nevada's most lurid theatrical environment.

Review: Brilliant!

Clever, fast paced, outrageously funny and never a dull moment. So many laugh out loud scenes, quotable lines and memorable characters. This book is relentlessly entertaining! A great read.

Daring Dooz

Sex, Violence & Useful Household Cleaning Tips

Synopsis

Mrs Hathaway, Mick and Jim's 60-year-old office cleaning lady, is a martial arts/extreme sports expert - skills she developed through online and home video courses. Daring Dooz is a highly successful global magazine, full of fictitious adventure stories featuring scantily clad pole dancers.

Mrs Hathaway is, however, the real thing, and accepts a series of global challenges for a £2 million advance. The challenges involve shark attacks, time warps, anacondas, MiG fighters, and the ironmongers/sex boutique at the Hotel du Lack. In a remote Amazon village, they are threatened by sex-mad caimans, exploding missionaries and murderous bandits with Mick and Jim coerced into videoing every terrifying step.

Review: Brilliant, funny book

Enter Mrs. Hathaway! What a character! A 60 year old, martial arts, street-fighting cleaning lady! Mick and Jim get tied up filming a set of dangerous, international challenges she has to take on for Daring Dooz magazine-including time spent up the far end of the Amazon. I laughed out loud countless times. Again more twists and turns, crazy characters and a totally unexpected final chapter.

Sea View Babylon

Sex, Violence & Spanish Verb Conjugation

Synopsis

Mick and Jim are forced into an unexpected holiday in Lanzarote. They book into Sea View, a bizarre re-creation of a 1950's Blackpool boarding house, right next to the beach. On their first afternoon, while enjoying a pedalo ride, they are threatened with assassination by both the CIA and KGB.

Subsequently, they are drawn into a web of lies, deceit and sexual excess involving MI7 - so secret, even MI5 and MI6 don't know about it. After five, bizarre, unexplained deaths they endure a spell in cell 101 with only a bucket for company. Later, they direct a video featuring a clapped out helicopter and two Florida swamp bikers with the goal of saving the Chief of Police's sex life. The climactic, underground, volcanic showdown is orchestrated by Polly, the world's most foul-beaked parrot.

Review: Funny and well-written

Far fetched? Certainly. Funny? Definitely. KGB and CIA operatives interrupt Mick and Jim's holiday pedalo trips with assassination threats - and it takes off from there. Constantly in jeopardy, Mick and Jim stumble around Lanzarote, through unexpected plot twists and turns. Star performer for me was Polly, the parrot who has been taught a wide range of obscene phrases by British holidaymakers. Really unexpected twist at the end - very clever!

Vampire Midwives

Sex, Violence & Warm Straight-Jackets

Synopsis

Mick and Jim are lured to deepest Yorkshire to film a bogus 'most haunted' video at a 13th-century castle built by architectural vandal, Gregory the Imbiber. The local villagers are having mass hallucinations about Dracula, Frankenstein and werewolves.

A mysterious death, leads our heroes to places they don't want to be - such as trapped 350 feet underground with a jar of pickled whelks, or facing the wrath of Scotland Yard's nastiest - CI Cragg. Their futile attempts to solve the mystery are complicated by terrifying paranormal activities, mad, frost-bitten neuroscientists, and Hollywood glamour and glitz, featuring Matt Damon and a lunatic film producer intent on making *Bourne and Bred in Yorkshire*. Just another day in the Dales...

Review: Brilliant read

Lots of supernatural fun in this quirky who-done-it set in a down-at-heel castle in the Yorkshire Dales. It features a mad Lord of the Realm, a devious New Scotland Yard detective, and a totally loopy Texan, looking to make the next Jason Bourne film. Mick and Jim are stuck in the middle trying to make a bogus haunted castle film, but end up getting much more than they bargained for. Loved it!

Botox Boulevard

Sex, Violence & The Art of Geranium Maintenance

Synopsis

Mick is on a mission to Hollywood intent on saving Jim's soul and any other bits of him that might be useful around the office. Horrible things happen. Like not finding out if Pamela Anderson screen tested for Hannibal Lecter. Fascinating information includes the fact that there are pubs in Ireland, and Bulgarian hit men in Hollywood.

What is the secret of the teak-finished iPhone and how do people cope with power-boating through seven miles of raw sewage? Why is Marlon Brando happy to serve soup, and JK Rowling so keen on setting peoples' feet in concrete? If you like geraniums, Florence Nightingale's spittoon and explosions that shift the San Andreas Fault by six feet. This is the book for you.

Review: Book 5 - Just as good as the rest

This is a really funny novel and follows on from the previous, Vampire Midwives. Mick and Jim end up in Hollywood desperately trying alternative therapies to solve a demonic possession. Think the Omen, with more jokes! They have to deal with sex therapists and violent chat shows, secret service operatives plus a strange set of dubious screen star lookalikes. I loved how just as you think they've succeeded, another threat arrives.

Papa Ratzy

Sex, Violence & Straddled Chainsaws

Synopsis

During a devastating night on the town, Mick and Jim befriend a killer wolf, called Twinkle. At the It's Alright He Won't Bite Urban Wolf Sanctuary, they learn how quickly volunteers' groins can disappear, and how best to stir your tea with an artificial insemination pipette. They are conned by the world's worst photographer, into dubious paparazzi assignments. Events quickly become life-threatening and they flee, with Twinkle, to Glencoe to work on a slasher movie for LA's Hemoglobin Productions.

They come up against a Sicilian assassin called Heidi, an Erich Von Stroheim look-a-like, a sex mad, soft porn writer who has trouble with her support stockings, American Civil War cannons, the lure of the Copper Sporrans' tea cakes, and the unbelievable power of Twinkle's bladder. Naturally, all is happily resolved on the desolate tundra around Archangel.

Review: Very funny

Loved this book. Mick and Jim get themselves a nice little earner, but the whole thing completely unravels leaving them in mortal danger! Avoiding death is made more difficult because they are looking after a killer wolf, called Twinkle. Totally hilarious from start to finish. The first and last chapters are classic.

Amazon links to novels in the Implosion Saga
(in chronological order):

They Win. You Lose.

Sex, Violence & Songs from the Shows

amazon.co.uk : <http://amzn.to/2ls3x9H>

amazon.com : <http://amzn.to/2mFvE6s>

Daring Dooz

Sex, Violence & Useful Household Cleaning Tips

amazon.co.uk : <http://amzn.to/2m48nOe>

amazon.com : <http://amzn.to/2mFBj2P>

Sea View Babylon

Sex, Violence & Spanish Verb Conjugation

amazon.co.uk : <http://amzn.to/2lPkH3>

amazon.com : <http://amzn.to/2m8RB00>

Vampire Midwives

Sex, Violence & Warm Straight-Jackets

amazon.co.uk : <http://amzn.to/2lhssMv>

amazon.com : <http://amzn.to/2lrsAJi>

Botox Boulevard

Sex, Violence & The Art of Geranium Maintenance

amazon.co.uk : <http://amzn.to/2m44jxi>

amazon.com : <http://amzn.to/2mdZCku>

Papa Ratzy

Sex, Violence & Straddled Chainsaws

amazon.co.uk : <http://amzn.to/2lhDSjv>

amazon.com : <http://amzn.to/2lcSCEV>

Other Stan Arnold links

Website: <http://www.stanarnoldbooks.com>

Facebook: <http://tinyurl.com/ojy5ubz>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/stanwriter>

First chapter of Book 7 of the Implosion Saga

Lee Kwon Lien jumped out of his expensive leather chair.

‘That’s him!’ he shouted.

The three senior executives in the room nodded enthusiastically, even though they had no idea what he was on about.

The Hong Kong skyline outside the penthouse boardroom, with its titanium towers glinting in the sunlight meant nothing. The ancient Star ferry wending its slow and easy way over to Kowloon meant nothing. The plush boardroom décor, with all the latest gadgets, as specified by one of Stephen Spielberg’s closest technical assistants, meant even less than nothing.

All that mattered was the short clip of a tuxedoed man on the video screen.

‘Get me Hollywood Casting,’ cried Lee, ‘and email the footage over to them.’

An executive punched in a speed dial and handed him the mobile. Lee gave all the details he could about the man, his age, anything between 40 and 70, his height, anything between 5’ 6” and 5’ 10” depending on his shuffling, lurching, undulating gait. His enormous paunch, his drab facial features, his bald head with tufts of uncombed hair, and his grey designer stubble, which, actually, looked more like a propensity not to shave his double chin and drooping jowls.

And yes! Thinking back to studying British constitutional law at Oxford, the ayes had it! Bulbous, glazed and with red, luminous rims, and bags you could’ve taken ‘coals to Newcastle’ in.

Lee was rather proud of his immaculate upper crust English accent and his awareness of English idioms and phrases dating back to Victorian times - from ‘Cor blimey guv, it’s a fair cop’ to ‘I bet that Wallace Simpson ain’t ‘arf a goer’, to ‘They think it’s all over’, to ‘Drinking in the last chance saloon.’

He supposed he’d had a leg up in life. His family was from Heilongjiang Province in North East China, and when Mao died, his father had started a small factory manufacturing alcoholic drinks. Demand and production increased, and the family became very wealthy. But Lee’s eyes were on other prizes.

At 21, after returning from Oxford, he turned down a directorship, broke away from his family and their fortune and went out on his own. When the Hong Kong lease was up, he was one of the first across the border, his sights set on becoming ‘whatever he could be’ in films. He’d been a big Bruce Lee fan, from *Enter the Dragon* and *Fist of Fury*, right through to the incomplete *Game of Death*. Even if he’d been a poorly paid clapper boy for the rest of his life, he would have been happy.

He got a job in Xanatu Productions in Wan Chai, making tea, but soon made friends and got invites to shoots. Later, he borrowed a camera, took it home to his one-room apartment in the shabbier part of Kwun Tong district, and spent countless nights and weekends getting to grips with the technology.

Within a year, he made his first short film about betting - from the grimy back alleys, behind the international fashion stores, to the Hong Kong racecourse. It won an award and got noticed by the Xanatu management. He was soon earmarked as an imaginative, exciting cameraman, and progressed to directing TV commercials. Within five years, he wrote and directed his first full-length feature film, *The Boy with the Henna Tattoo* – a spoof

action film, full of jokes. It was extremely popular in China and, eventually, around the world.

After that success, he was invited to join the Xanatu board and, fifteen years after he brewed his first cup of corporate tea, he was voted in, unopposed, as CEO and Chairman. Since then, everything he touched had turned to gold. There was the penthouse, the yacht, the Lamborghinis, offices in the best parts of Hollywood, London and Sydney - and his boardroom, featuring three signed Lew Roller prints. And to think, he could still have been scrubbing out vats!

But that face. That face, beaming and bleary, world weary and trodden on, blotched and bloated - and that red, blobby nose with badly clipped nostril hairs. Fantastic!

He dismissed the executives.

Lee sat back, swivelled in his chair, and gazed out across the harbour. This was important. That face would take him to the next level. Make him a household name. Start stacking the Oscars. Become an A-lister's A-Lister.

About an hour later, his mobile broke the silence. He almost leapt out of this chair. An American voice spoke - it was Hollywood Casting. They'd put their premier team on it. It had been a high-speed search that had gone worldwide - the Caribbean, some place called Yorkshire, Hollywood, of course, and even the far end of the Amazon. And it had all ended with a call to Lee's niece in London.

'What?' cried Lee. 'May Piow Yong's a sweetie, but what the hell does she know? She works in some drinking dive in Soho.'

'I know, I know, it's hard to believe,' said the American voice, 'but she confirmed his name and address, and we've checked it out, 100 per cent accurate, also.'

Lee Kwon Lien sat back in his chair and gazed happily at the ceiling. This was a glorious moment. He'd recently negotiated taking over the franchise. He had six hundred million earmarked for production, and, now, there was no doubt about it. Michael Selwyn Barton of Greek Street, wherever the fuck that was, complete with what looked like custard streaks on his tuxedo lapels, was going to be the next James Bond.