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Opening extract from

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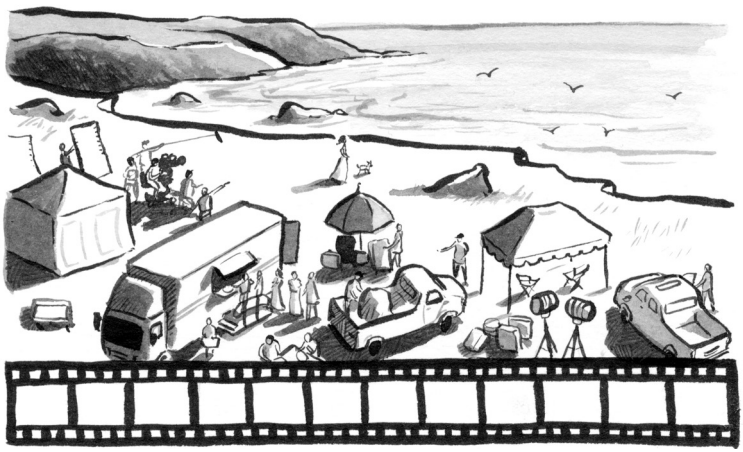
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'CUT!' YELLED THE director. 'Cut, cut, cut!'

He was a gaunt man with a receding hairline and small, round glasses that perched high on the bridge of his beaked nose, giving him the air of a worried crow. Leaning into the sea wind, his face turning fire-engine red, he bore down on the hapless dog handler cowering on the edge of the film set. Actors and assorted crew scurried from his path.

'You imbecile! You absolute dunce! Call yourself an animal trainer? You couldn't teach a mouse to eat cheese. You couldn't teach a horse to graze grass. You couldn't teach a bird to fly, or a cheetah to chase antelope, or a fish

to swim. What did I tell you yesterday, Otto? For the fiftieth time, I instructed you to find me a dog I would love, a dog with attitude, a dog that will have cinema audiences across the world cheering one moment and reaching for the tissues the next. And what do you do? You produce a greyhound with the attention span of a goldfish. We've also had an obese golden retriever too lazy to do a single trick, yet with all the energy in the world when it came to gobbling three trays of smoked salmon sandwiches from the catering unit. We've had a border collie with rickets, a deranged spaniel and a bull terrier that almost amputated the hand of my supporting actress. If she hadn't been an animal lover, the lawsuit would have bankrupted the studio.'

He shook his fist. 'One more chance, my friend. If the next mutt you bring me isn't capable of winning an Oscar, you're fired.'

A crowd had gathered behind the ropes keeping onlookers from wandering on to the set. The woman beside Laura rolled her eyes. 'Oh dear. If the next scene goes wrong, I'm afraid that Brett will spontaneously combust. I don't suppose you'd consider volunteering your dog for the role? He's an extraordinary looking animal. A bit like a wolf, only kinder. Anyone would fall in love with him.'

Laura glowed with pride. She hugged Skye, her three-legged Siberian husky, and his tail thumped ecstatically. 'You'd be surprised. I think he's the most amazing dog on the planet, but—'

'And so do I,' put in Tariq, her best friend.

'But what?' asked the woman, who was dressed simply in jeans and a pale blue shirt but had the poise and photogenic features of an actress.

'Well, I think Skye is perfect, but not everyone feels the same way,' Laura said. 'Your director sounds very fussy. If he can't cope with a fat retriever, I doubt he'd want a husky with a missing leg.'

The woman laughed. 'Oh, don't pay any attention to Brett. He's all bluster. Beneath it, he's a bit of a geek. And he's super talented – one of the hottest movie-makers in Hollywood. There's a lot of excitement about our film. We've only been shooting for a week and already there's talk of awards.'

'What's the title of your movie?' asked Tariq. He and Laura had been overjoyed to discover, on the first day of the summer holidays, that a film set had mushroomed overnight on the outskirts of St Ives, their seaside home town. As a special treat, they'd begun the morning with breakfast at the Sunny Side Up cafe, but as soon as they'd swallowed the last delicious bite they'd begged permission from Laura's uncle to go out onto the cliffs and watch the filming.

'No running off to Hollywood now,' Calvin Redfern joked as they'd left.

'The title of our film is *The Aristocratic Thief*,' the woman told them. 'It's set in the nineteenth century and is about a wealthy man, renowned and respected in the highest circles in the land, who steals a priceless painting from the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, Russia. That's where we're filming next.'

'If it's set in Russia, what are you doing in Cornwall?' Laura wanted to know.

'We're shooting the English bit of the movie. In the story, the child heroine of the film is an orphan who comes from a beautiful seaside town. She has a dog she adores. This pet plays a vital role in the film, which is why it's a disaster that we're having so much difficulty finding the right one.'

She smiled. 'I haven't introduced myself. I'm Kay Allbright.'

Laura shook her hand. 'I'm Laura Marlin and this is my best friend, Tariq, and my husky, Skye. Do you mind me asking if you're an actress?'

'Was. A long time ago. Now I have the job of my dreams. I'm a screenwriter. I get to research and write the film itself. It's challenging and frequently frustrating, but I'm passionate about it.'

Skye stiffened. His blue eyes were locked on the dog handler, who was carrying a yapping Pomeranian onto the set. Laura took a firm grip on his collar. 'Behave yourself, Skye,' she scolded. 'You've already had breakfast.'

Beyond the cameras was an encampment of tents and caravans, plus a catering trailer with a red and white striped awning. The door of the largest caravan opened and out came a girl of about twelve or thirteen with long flaxen hair, wearing a ragged dress of white muslin. Her striking prettiness was marred by a bored scowl. Fortunately for the dog handler, it vanished as soon as she saw the Pomeranian.

'Oh he's so cute!' she cried in an American accent. 'What's his name?'

The man looked relieved. '*Her* name is Britney. She's quite the little actress. Loves attention. I should have used her from the start. You even have the same hair colour.'

'That's Ana María Tyler, who plays the orphan heroine of the story,' Kay whispered to Laura and Tariq. 'She's barely in her teens and she already has five movies under her belt.' She added under her breath: 'And an attitude to match.'

The director strode onto the set. 'Is this the best that you could come up with, Otto – a Pomeranian? Give me strength. How many times do you want me to explain that we need a dog capable of saving a young girl's life, or stopping an arch villain? This one couldn't scare a canary.'

Ana María pouted and clutched Britney to her chest. 'Yes, but she is a dog that audiences will go gooey over and you said that's important too.'

'True,' acknowledged Brett. 'Very true. Okay, we'll give Miss Britney a shot. Let go of her so that Otto can put her on her marker. Crew, take up your stations. Ready, Ana María? Action!'

The cameras rolled. As Laura and Tariq leaned forward eagerly, a low growl rumbled in Skye's throat. Laura soothed him with one hand and took a firmer grip on his collar with the other. He seemed to think that Britney would make a yummy mid-morning snack.

Ana María strolled along the cliff in the sunshine, admiring the view over the shining sea. The Pomeranian was with Otto, out of sight. Ana María bent down to pick wild flowers from the waving grass. One, a poppy, was

slightly out of reach. She leaned closer to the edge and stretched for it.

Laura knew she was only acting but it was nerve-wracking to watch.

As Ana María's fingers closed around the poppy, there was a horrible cracking sound. The section of cliff on which she was kneeling suddenly disintegrated, catapulting her, screaming, over the edge.

Laura gave an involuntary shriek.

'Don't worry,' whispered Kay. 'It's all part of the show. She's landed on a specially constructed ledge and is quite safe. There's also a net beneath should anything go wrong.'

'I hope they've secured them well,' Tariq said worriedly. 'If she did fall, she'd almost certainly be killed. If she wasn't crushed on the rocks, she'd be drowned. The currents around here are incredibly strong.'

Laura couldn't repress a shudder. Tariq was speaking from experience. Barely six months earlier, he and Laura had come close to dying at Dead Man's Cove, only a stone's throw from where they were standing. Even now she could feel the power of the sea as it had sucked at her, trying to drag her into its freezing black depths.

Ana María was clinging to the rocky ledge by her fingers. 'Help!' she screamed. 'Help!'

Britney the Pomeranian went tearing across the cliff top, yapping for all she was worth. Her role was to run to Ana María's aid, realise there was a problem, and race away to get help. At least, that was the plan.

Unfortunately, nobody had communicated that to Skye. The husky took one look at Britney bounding like a bunny

through the long grass, wrenched out of Laura's grasp and tore after her.

Laura clapped her hands to her mouth in horror. She dared not call him while the cameras were rolling, but how else was she to stop him? Kay and Tariq were also frozen to the spot. All they could do was watch the disaster unfold.

As Britney neared the screaming actress, some sixth sense warned her of approaching danger. She glanced over her shoulder and let out an audible squeak when she saw the husky bearing down on her. Realising that escape was impossible, she chose to leap over the cliff, landing on the ledge that Ana María was holding onto.

'Ouch!' screeched Ana María as Britney's claws dug into her hand. She let go. That shouldn't have mattered because she was standing on a wide wooden platform which had been cleverly painted to blend in with the rocks and was invisible to the cameras. Unfortunately, the jolt to the plank caused the fastenings that secured it to the rock to loosen. It only slipped a couple of millimetres, but it was enough to make Ana María lose her balance and come close to falling. This time, her blood-curdling scream had nothing to do with acting.

'CUT!' yelled the director, but no one appeared to be listening.

'Skye!' yelled Laura. 'Skye!'

She ducked under the ropes and sprinted to the edge of the cliff, followed by Tariq and Kay. Chaos broke out on the set.

'Do something!' Brett Avery shouted at the stunt

coordinator. 'What do you think I pay you for? Go down and get her. Call the coastguard, call the fire brigade, call the Queen if you have to, just get my star back on solid ground.'

Cautiously, he leaned over the cliff. 'Ana María, honey, whatever you do, don't look down.'

Ana María immediately glanced at the sea churning far below and screamed even louder. The Pomeranian whimpered and whined.

The stunt expert was trying to wriggle into a climbing harness while yelling at his assistant to get a rope that the actress could hold on to until he reached her. Ana María's mother, who'd appeared out of nowhere, added to the din by crying hysterically and threatening to sue.

The weight of people gathered on the clifftop caused a further loosening of the unstable edge. Pellets of gravel rained down on Ana María and the Pomeranian. Britney yapped madly. Ana María sobbed and shook.

'What the devil's taking so long?' yelled the director, but the stunt coordinator didn't answer. He was staring at his climbing harness in confusion. 'I don't understand,' he mumbled. 'I don't understand.'

'Something is wrong,' Tariq whispered to Laura as the adults began to argue. 'He looks as if he's lost something.'

Ana María gave a screech that could have shattered a pane of glass. The wind was picking up and threatening to suck her off the cliff.

The stunt assistant came racing up with a spare rope. 'Grab this and hang on tight,' he called down to Ana María. 'Try to stay calm. A lifeboat is on its way and there

is a safety net below so you're not in any real danger.'

The words had barely left his mouth when the catastrophe happened. A gust of wind launched Britney into space. Ana María, who was clinging desperately to the rope at the time, was unaware that the Pomeranian had fallen until Britney's furry body flew past her. The little dog hit the water and flailed briefly before disappearing beneath the waves. For an already petrified Ana María, the shock was so great that her legs crumpled beneath her. She swung out over the void, past the safety net.

The stunt coordinator was frantic. 'Hang on tight, Ana María,' he yelled as the actress twirled on the end of the rope, bouncing periodically off the cliff face. 'We're going to pull you up. Whatever you do, don't let go.'

But try as she might, Ana María didn't have the strength to obey. At the first tug of the rope, her hands slipped and she plummeted downwards. She hit the boiling surf and disappeared.

'Now that,' Kay said, 'was not in the script.'