

Low Angles

a Stoney Winston mystery by

Jim Stinson

1

Our own little Jackie Coogan shifted from foot to foot in the shadows just beyond the lit kitchen set, basking in the attentions of the makeup girl, the property master, and the teacher dispatched by the Los Angeles Unified School District to ensure that his thirst for knowledge was slaked even while performing in this soap commercial.

“Lift your face, honey.” The boy obeyed the makeup girl reluctantly, since he was three years older than he looked and his eye level was perfect for inspecting her chest.

He favored her with a melting gaze – one of his better models. “Not too much powder.” His incipient baritone would put him out of business in about six months.

“And keep his front curls high; we don’t want a shadow on his eyes.” His mother hovered too, skinny and tight as a banjo.

As production manager, I hadn’t much to do now that the shoot was almost over, so I wandered toward the sound stage door, winding around Century stands, director’s chairs, lights, and foam cups full of cigarette butts pickled in coffee. As I ambled into the corridor, the massive door *thunked* behind me like the hatch of a walk-in meat locker.

Ken Simmons, the commercial’s producer, visible through the doorway of the lounge he was using as an office, clamped a phone receiver between chin and shoulder and waved me in. He mimed “be just a minute” and resumed his conversation.

“What’s so bad about them?” Pause. “Alan, dailies are hard to judge without experience. They looked okay to...” Pause. “Well...” Longer pause. “Well, Alan, I hear what you’re saying, but...” Very long pause.

I collected two half-donuts and my tenth foam cup of coffee from a side table and sat down to watch Ken through a foreground of Italian loafers propped on the table. Even Ken’s soles looked glossy, as if he shined them nightly. He dresses for the Polo Lounge in the perpetual hope that one day he will be big enough to do business there.

But not quite yet: “Alan, where am I going to get the budget for that?”

Ken is fifty, with a body that looks forty and eyes that no longer admit their age – or very much else. While he listened, he smoothed his curly black beard with a rubber oval set with stubby teeth, like the pad that holds bathroom soap.

“If you want to pay for it, you got it; it’s your money. I’ll find someone.” He looked at me as he said this.

“Talk to you later, Alan.”

He hung up, sighing, and pulled his feet off the table. “Got a sec, Stoney?”

“More like an hour, unless Fauntleroy decides to learn his lines.”

“Can’t the kid read cards?”

“Not in a tight two-shot; his eye-look’s wrong.”

Ken sighed again, then glanced at the phone as if his recent caller were somehow inside it. “Know Alan Greystoke?”

“If his nickname’s Tarzan.”

“Yeah, he did change it from something else. Alan’s got a lot of money from, well, someplace – and he likes to play with business ventures.”

I dunked a donut, which disintegrated in the coffee.

“Import-export, mail order houses, things like that. Now he’s backing a movie. I packaged it for him.”

“And he doesn’t like the dailies he’s seeing.”

“He doesn’t *know* what he’s seeing, but yeah, he doesn’t like them.”

“What’s he want you to do, fire the director?”

Ken stood up, shaking his head impatiently. “He says he wants to help her.”

“Help. *Her*.”

“Name’s Diane LaMotta – out of New York, I think.”

“I don’t know her.”

“You wouldn’t; it’s her first feature. Anyway, Alan wants someone to go up there and bail her out.”

“Where’s *up there*?”

“In the San Gabriel mountains – about an hour away.” He parked his eighty dollar pants on the front edge of the table. “Want to take a shot at it?”

Did I want to walk into the middle of a production, tackle an unknown director, work twenty-four hours a day on a nickel budget to finish a fire-sale picture? Masochism is not among my many vices. “Let’s just say my enthusiasm knows bounds.”

“It’s seven-fifty a week for three weeks.”

Visions of rent money danced in my head. “All right; for twenty-two-fifty I’ll fake it.”

“Thanks, Stoney. I don’t like it either, but Alan calls the shots.”

I nodded.

“And keep out of trouble, right?” When I repeated the nod, Ken opened his anorexic briefcase, the type that proclaims its owner too important to carry anything thicker than a bank book. “You better run down and see him. Here’s his office address – and oh, here’s your check for today’s shoot.”

“ ‘Preciate it. I hope you’ll call me again, Ken.”

“Don’t get greedy.” He flashed his hey-just-kidding smile. Ken never makes a joke without scoring underneath. We’ve been friends for years, but he’s the one who gives the work and I’m the one who takes it. Occasionally he likes to remind me.

On my way out, I strolled up the hallway, guessing the identities of the “stars” hanging there in 8x10 frames; each actor posed with the eager, chubby owner of the little studio; each print inked with show-biz greetings. *To my pal Jack. Best regards to fabulous Jack.* Snappy clothes three decades old and faces as forgotten as a dead bookie’s. Jack too had gone to his Reward one day during the fourth race at Santa Anita, and now they all hung together in the perpetual fluorescent glare of the hallway, a necropolis of Hollywood also-rans.

But who was I to criticize? Stoney Winston: failed actor and unsold writer, marginal freelance editor, production manager, and even director if the film was safely short, cheap, and trivial. I’d never worked in a big studio like Warners or Universal and never seen a budget over two hundred thousand. It’s hard to be more also-ran than *that*.

Half an hour later I was chugging south on the San Gabriel Freeway in my antique Beetle, the latest partner in my perverse affair with Volkswagen. This '63 bug is really a step up from my '75 Rabbit because it seldom breaks and when it does, I can fix it.

The uncertain glory of an April day, even down here in the industrial flats: bright lemon sun splashing on factories and warehouses, rim-lighting oil tanks, glazing the wall of the flood control channel like egg on an endless tan bread loaf. No helping the palms, though: reluctant little smog-shot fronds high in the air, as if the trees had thought, "After all that sweat to get up here, I guess I oughtta *sprout* something."

My nicotine city. So different from gray Bristol and the green English valleys around it. They grow greener in my memory every year – sixteen, to date – since me mum divorced my sergeant major father and took her teenage boy to California. If I went back to England now, I'd be just another tripping Yank, homogenized by half a lifetime in the true cultural heart of America, L.A. – God help us all. Suddenly film making in the green April mountains seemed seductive.

Greystoke's office was in Downey, a little town impacted in L.A. that might have lent its name to the fabric softener: a fuzzy, bland jumble of light industry, hopeful commerce, and middling homes. The one-story stucco building labeled "A.G. Enterprises" could have housed a job printer, a maternity shop, or an employment agency; and over the years it probably had.

Now it commenced with a reception area done up in the plastic Gay Nineties decor favored by pizza parlors. Greystoke's secretary, a slim girl with a button nose and delicate hands, announced me on the 'com line and, after the usual California custom, offered coffee, which I refused. She had the ambivalent manner of some modern, pretty women: offended if you ogled and resentful if you didn't. She fiddled at her desk as if she hadn't much to do, while I inspected the carpet.

The office door was opened by a slender man not five feet tall, in a business suit he must have bought at a shop for preteen executives. "He'll see you now."

As I entered, the tiny man stepped aside and seemed to disappear. Alan Greystoke stood behind a desk the size of a plywood panel and over three feet high. It hid him from the chest down, and when he marched around it to shake my hand I saw why: Greystoke was only two inches taller than his assistant.

"Sit down – not that chair, this one." The chair was scaled to fit the assistant and I perched my gangling six feet-two on it like an adult visiting a kindergarten.

Greystoke posed with arms akimbo, doing George C. Scott doing Patton; but the stance pushed his padded jacket upward until it separated from his body like a camel's hair cuirass. It spoiled the effect.

"Stoney Winston, huh? Should I know you?"

"Nobody else does."

"Give you a tip: never run yourself down. You want people to hear, you make a noise. Shannon! Get him a drink." He strutted toward his desk as spectral Shannon coalesced beside me.

"Coke is fine."

Shannon's fluty alto matched his looks: "We've got some Pepsi." He disappeared at his master's wave.

Greystoke climbed into an executive chair raised to where he looked normal behind his desk, lit a cigarette from a gold desk box, and struck a magisterial pose. "I want you to listen; when you work for me, you listen, because I got a lotta things to do and I never say things twice. Clear? Okay: I got a two-million-dollar picture up there."

"Ken said he had two hundred thousand."

"I said listen. Yeah, but that's just the cash. Know what points are? You do. Okay. I got a big nut to make

on this one, so I got to have a winner, and that's exactly what I'm gonna have." He spoke in a harsh tenor, as if pushing authority into his voice by main force.

"Simmons talked me into this director. No credits, no rep; but okay, she did some PBS shit—American Playhouse or something. It put me to sleep, but it had class, and this picture has to have class because it's my picture."

"What's it about?"

"Outlaw motorcycle creeps."

Shannon appeared with a glass of cola and a neat pink party napkin. I nodded thanks.

Greystoke blinked his popping lizard eyes and shot his cuffs. The links were diamonds set in gold. "Now how is that class? It isn't; it's box office. The class comes from the way we handle it. That's why I went with this bimbo director. Are you starting to get it? Okay, they ship the film down every day and I look at the dailies and I don't like what I'm seeing."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm seeing the class but not the box office. Pretty pictures with nothin' goin' on. You follow? Okay, then you see what I want you to do: go up there and goose the picture. Get me more action stuff."

"Is the shoot on schedule?"

"Who knows schedule? They keep sending film, but does it add up to a movie? How the hell should I know? You make movies; I make money. That's your division of labor, right? That's efficient."

And in my case, typical. "Mr. Greystoke, I can't walk in on a production without clear authority."

"You're working for me; *I'm* clear authority."

"You can't do it that way."

"You're telling me what I can do?"

"Of course not, but you want me to ghost-direct that film."

"Yeah, that's the word."

"The director won't accept that unless you tell her. You'll have to put it in writing."

Greystoke looked annoyed at being told he *had* to do something, but he saw the logic of it and nodded. "Write the letter. Dictate it to Kimberley outside. She'll fix it up and I'll sign it. You take it up there."

"And Ken Simmons ought to phone her too."

"I'll take care of it." Having regained the initiative, he looked pleased again. "Now you want to know about money."

"Ken said seven-fifty a week for three weeks."

"I'll do better: I'm giving you that *plus* four points."

Oh joy: four percent of profits in an industry where "profits" are defined by the most acrobatic accounting this side of the Pentagon. Nobody would ever see a penny.

"Shannon's got your contract and your first week." He waved a hand like a monarch bestowing a largess. "In advance."

My plans for supper hotdogs switched to steak. "Can I have a script to study?"

"Shannon: get a script. You'll like it. I got it cheap but I, uh, fixed it up some. You'll see."

"Have you looked at dailies today?"

"Not 'til six o'clock – at the lab. Meet us there. Get details from Shannon."

"I'll drive to the location tomorrow. Where are they shooting?"

"Near Bouquet Canyon, up back of Newhall. Shannon will show you on the map. He drives me. Kimberley!" The secretary entered as if she'd been lurking behind the door. "Take a letter from this guy. Shannon, give him his contract and the money. And show him where the hell to go."

As I hauled myself up to adult height and started for the door, Greystoke yelled at his tiny assistant: "Shannon, wash that glass up when you're done out there."

I roared homeward through the ozone, boxed by eighteen-wheelers: a silver and burgundy Peterbilt tractor climbing my tail pipes, front view blocked by a furniture van bearing a bumper sticker from L.A.'s best fast food chain:

IN-N-OUT BURGER

abridged, by local custom, to:

IN-N-OUT URGE

A shower, early supper – hotdogs after all – then down to the little Hollywood film lab that was processing Greystoke's footage.

I slumped in a screening room seat, Shannon to the left of me, Greystoke to the right of me, peering over the seat backs at yes-terday's rushes of *Cycles from Hell*.

Actually, it was good stuff: strong compositions, energetic truck shots, good actor blocking. Hard to judge performance, since Greystoke watched the dailies before the sound was synced, but the footage moved crisply.

At the start of the final shot, the actors paused and looked off-screen; then a striking woman with a dark tan and auburn hair in flying pigtailed ran into the frame. She adjusted the position of one actor, then turned to look at the camera. Her deep eyes were a cool gray, the eyes of a hyper-intelligent cat. Her lips formed what looked like "Okay" then she loped out of the frame and the action began.

Greystoke rasped, "That's her."

There was nothing the matter with the footage and the woman I had glimpsed looked smart, decisive, and in control. So what was Greystoke worried about?

When the lights came up, I studied the empty seat backs while the wannabe mogul studied me.

Finally, he lost patience. "See what I mean?"

"I'm afraid I don't."

Greystoke wagged pudgy hands as he searched for words, then gave up. "I don't like it."

Something funny here. "Is the footage *really* the problem, or is there something else?"

Greystoke looked affronted. "*What* else? The only problem's right *there*." He stabbed a stubby arm at the now blank screen. "It's... *blah*; it's...." The phrase he wanted finally surfaced: "*It's got no balls*." He looked pleased with this critical insight.

I pushed my luck: "So the production's going smoothly?"

His irritation burst into full bloom: "Who knows? I'm not paying you to worry about production, understand? You go up there and make me an action picture!"

"Why are you worried about how the picture's going?" At first I couldn't place the voice; then I realized that Shannon had actually volunteered a sentence. He'd been invisible again.

"There's nothing obviously wrong with these dailies. So what *is* the problem?"

Greystoke looked at me, at Shannon, at me again. Then his lizard eyelids flickered, as if in embarrassment. "Like I said, you make movies; I don't, understand? I got a lot tied up in this, an' speaking frankly, I don't know what I'm lookin' at. Is it a movie – or what? Know what I mean?"

"Then you want me to see if the footage will make a good film." Greystoke jerked his head up and down. "I can do that better in a cutting room. Why don't I start putting it together?"

Shannon surprised me again: "Because we need some eyes up there."

Greystoke and Shannon were "we"? Interesting. "Okay, then. I'll leave first thing in the morning."

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Greystoke resumed the helm: "You better. And starting tomorrow, I want *balls!*"
An ambiguous statement, considering.

2

Clear, lemony light again this morning, under the hard blue dome of an April sky – the same breathtaking weather that a sadistic God bestows on every Rose Parade, to taunt the TV viewers in Vermont. The San Gabriel mountains tumbled beside me along the freeway, their dumpy, slag heap contours softened by a fresh coat of green.

I was roaring north-westward in the Beetle toward a tiny mountain village – a flyspeck on the map northeast of Newhall – which was now playing host to the production of *Cycles from Hell*.

The film's story was old enough to grow mushrooms on:

Framed by crooked citizens, charismatic biker returns from slammer to lead outlaw gang in wreaking vengeance on town. After crowd-pleasing pillage and rapine, evil villagers are punished, bikers ride into sunset, charismatic leader achieves mythic death and ascends to sit at right hand of Harley-Davidson or something.

While the Beetle struggled into the foothills, I revolved the trite plot in my mind as if studying a rock; but I could find no place to cut—no angles that would turn it into a gem. If you try to carve a clinker, you just get a smaller clinker.

Winding vaguely north down the perilous two-lane road, I took in the mountains looming left and right, eucalypti breaking the sun-shine into hot shards and cool splotches. A hairpin curve around a knoll, then a short, rolling valley infested with a hamlet announced by a rusty, bullet-plugged sign: Calisher Rotary, Wednesday Noon, Riverview Motel.

Slowing to thirty, I rolled past the motel on the right, a dirt crossroad, a trailer park full of giant metal slugs, and a meadow; then the stores on my left gave out and I spotted a dust cloud rising behind them. The buzz of motorcycle engines drifted in.

Must be that dirt road. I turned around, drove south through the village, then west on rutted clay toward the dust and insect cycle drone. An even smaller track branched to the right and disappeared over the lip of a depression. I parked and walked in.

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It was the town dump, a great clay bowl half filled with bed-springs, boxes, jalopies, appliances, great mounds of cardboard subsiding into compost – and at the far side, the tinny clutter of a movie company. The camera and reflectors were aimed to my right, so I trudged leftward to avoid them, around the rim and down among the happy crew of *Cycles from Hell*.

I found a bargain basement shoot: a venerable Arriflex BL camera with a ten-to-one zoom lens atop a fluid pan head atop an Italian spider dolly. Three or four banks of quartz lights, so they had a generator someplace, but mostly square reflectors on tubing stands. A few director's chairs with patent umbrellas clamped to their arms. It seemed that I'd wandered through a time warp into a film school of the early seventies.

Cast members lounged under a canvas shade that also shielded a table sagging under coffee urn, water dispenser, and the usual donuts, re-baking in the desert heat. Several vans and cars – and a sprawl of Harley-Davidson bikes under their own shade canopy.

People clustered in distinct groups: scruffy bikers in leather and denim uniforms, crew in baseball caps and work boots – many sporting cute T-shirts (*Electricians Are Juicier. Edith Head Gave Great Costume*) – cast members in makeup with Kleenex buffers tucked into their collars.

A grip carrying hammer, spirit level, and a handful of wooden wedges was truing up the dolly tracks: checking them with the level, tapping wedges beneath the low spots, double-checking. The as-sistant cameraman fussed with the Arri: removing the lens and blowing out the film gate with a syringe, adjusting the clamped umbrella to shade the film magazine.

Diane LaMotta stood in the meager shadow of a grip truck, flipping pages of her script and peering at it through reading glasses. She held sunglasses by one earpiece, in her mouth.

As I approached, the unabashed male in me took automatic inventory: thick hiking boots and short red socks, brown legs whose sleek lines were only slightly marred by knobby knees, khaki walking shorts, and seersucker shirt of the kind displayed in preppie catalogs. Overall: a lanky frame set off by pleasant local ripenesses. Strong hands with short nails and a plastic K-Mart watch on one wrist. Thick pigtailed colored Clairol auburn pulled her hair defiantly off slightly oversized ears.

“Ms. LaMotta? I'm Stoney Winston.” In closeup, she was perhaps as old as thirty – about two years younger than I am.

She looked up and down my six-foot-two as if making a similar survey, checking out my short brown hair, roman nose with chin to match, and a frame that didn't exactly strain the fabric of my polo shirt and jeans. I recalled that my third-best sneakers were tatty, but stopped myself from glancing down at them.

She looked me in the eye again. “You didn't waste any time.” Her large gray eyes were as hostile as her tone. “Greystoke said to be here this morning. How's it going?”

“Just dandy until a minute ago.” She snapped the script shut and clamped it in a protective armpit. “So how do we play it? Do you throw me off the set or just whisper orders in my ear?”

“Not necessarily either.”

“Shall we cut the crap? Greystoke sent you to take over the picture. Simmons's phone call made that clear.” She had the kind of husky voice that could purr when happy. Now, however, it carried an abrasive rasp.

“I don't work for Simmons, and Greystoke told me to do whatever was needed.”

“Whatever was...” She turned away toward the grip truck and addressed it grimly: “I'm not going to play this game.”

“Ms. LaMotta, I don't like this any better than you do.”

She swung back to look at me. “I'll just bet.” We held a four-second staring competition, then she whipped off the reading glasses and put on her shades. “What did you have to do to Greystoke to grease in here?”

“This isn't going to help a tough situation.”

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“Then unmake the situation: get your ass in gear and get out; leave me the hell alone.” She opened the script at random and pretended to study it. I thought of reminding her to put on her reading glasses, but suppressed the impulse.

“We both know I’m not going to do that.”

“Then any time you feel like taking over, you come and announce it to everybody.” Her voice rose: “And if you get up the courage to do that, which I doubt, I’m going to tell you and everybody else just what I think of little suck-up no-talent creeps who stab people in the back. In the meantime, stay the hell out of my sight.”

People fifty feet away were turning to look. “Can we talk about this quietly?”

She paused, pulled her mouth into a straight line, then moved close until the six-inch difference in our heights forced her to look up at my face. “Maybe we can. Start with some answers: who is trying to close down this movie?”

“How so?”

“Give me a break!” She took a deep breath and lowered her voice again. “All right, one: Simmons is the producer but he’s never even showed up. Two: the bikers turn out to be amateurs who never acted in their lives. Three: the D.P. is bombed half the time and the key grip does nothing but argue with me, and four: the production man-ager walked out yesterday.”

“Why?”

“‘Problems,’ he said. ‘Delays. Poor cooperation.’”

“Anything more specific?”

“Isn’t that funny? He was somewhat evasive about details.” Her growl turned bitter: “I have three more weeks to shoot eight weeks’ worth of stuff. Twenty-five people to wrangle, and no production manager.”

“I’m replacing him.”

“That’s not true and you know it.”

I started to say “I’m only supposed...” but she exploded.

“*Why are you giving me this shit?*” I could understand her anger but her abrasiveness was growing tiresome. “Why don’t you try listening for a minute?”

“Why don’t you go fuck a hot Harley tailpipe!”

With this quaint topical allusion, Diane LaMotta loped away toward the waiting camera.

“That’s what you call your basic New York mouth.” The familiar gravel baritone came from above and behind. As I turned, the grip truck passenger door opened to disgorge Stogie Rucker in the flesh – about 270 pounds of it.

“Good to seeya, Winston, howya been?” Stogie rolled forward, impeccable in starched yellow sport shirt and tan slacks belted just south of his solar plexus, where his girth is a foot less than at mid-paunch. It keeps his pants up. At five feet-six, Stogie resembles a weather balloon with a big white moustache.

He relit his dinky trademark cigar with a vintage Zippo and shook my hand. “So you’re taking over.”

“Just helping. Front office thinks there’s trouble here.”

“They’re right, for a change.”

“What’s happening?”

“The usual: twenty-hour days; crappy equipment; four weeks to shoot a whole goddam feature; non-union crew. Like I said, the usual.”

“You’re union: I. A.”

“And I ain’t even here, am I? But things get slow some-times – you know how it is. Gotta keep myself in bourbon and cigars.”

“I know the feeling. You the key grip?” He nodded shortly. “Any problems with the director?”

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Stogie spat precisely ten inches from his gleaming Hush Puppies – he could shoot films in a colliery and not get smudged – and gazed off toward the camera. “Myself, I think she knows her business. She works fast and she don’t ask me for unrealistic stuff.”

“How do you mean?”

“You know how it is: some directors want a hundred yards of track for one goddam shot. Then they want a hundred more at right angles. Not her. She calls for track and then builds half a day’s setups on it. That kinda thing.”

“She thinks someone’s screwing her movie.”

Stogie chortled. “Ever know a director who didn’t?”

“So it’s just her paranoia?”

He bestowed slightly more attention on his cigar butt than it seemed to warrant. “Probably.”

“But not definitely?”

After a shrug that did interesting things to his belt line, Stogie gazed off toward the crew and camera. “Ya get a feeling, you see what I mean? Like things just ain’t gettin’ done. Ah, who knows?”

“How about the crew?”

“What about ‘em?”

“Taking orders from a woman.”

“My boys take orders from *me*.”

“And you?”

Stogie measured the horizon through gold aviator bifocals, smoothing his thick silver mane. Then he sighed. “Everything changes. Got to, I guess. Hell, I don’t know – today there’s nothing but pussies. Everyone’s a pussy.”

“I think she’d resent that.”

He spat again, disgusted. “Naw, I mean *pussy* pussies; men, broads – makes no difference. Not like the old days.” Then, as if embar-rassed by this sneak attack of nostalgia, he grunted and stepped on his cigar butt. “Break’s over, I guess.”

Stogie waddled toward the crew, pulling a crushed trucker’s cap from his belt and settling it on his head.

I spent the rest of the morning watching the shoot, then mingled with the crew at lunch. I knew a couple of them and they confirmed Stogie: it was the usual ultra low-budget shoot: long days full of two-take setups and desperate improvisations.

Sean Parker had the lead: a beautiful hunk with an ego as big as his shoulders and the brain of a gerbil. He’d done a TV series until cocaine made him too unreliable to hire.

The bikers had been recruited from a local club, “The Cross-bones,” and they had little to do in the film but roar around and raise hell, which they managed with authentic banality. Greasy, thuggish men and sallow women, they said little for the national gene pool.

They were kept in line, more or less, by one Pits Caudle, a stocky man of fifty with a face moon-cratered by ancient acne, who trans-lated the director’s instructions into biker argot and saw to it that his scabrous troops carried them out.

Shooting resumed after lunch, with Diane LaMotta in six places at once, spotting the camera, blocking actors, checking makeup.

Her energy was impressive, as I’d already discovered. She would approve the lens and angle, rehearse the cast, talk the bikers through their background roles, order a take, consult the cameraman, order another, break the setup, and move decisively to the next one – usually at a half-trot.

The crew seemed willing enough but slow, and the fat, balding cameraman displayed a tell-tale lethargy

following a lunchtime disappearance. Diane had said he was drunk half the time. All in all, she was pushing forward, but she couldn't keep this up without a production manager.

The sequence they were shooting covered the biker hero's return from jail to a gang whose interim mentor was ungracious about restoring the post to his predecessor. Now they were jousting for it on bikes in the arena of the dump, swinging cast-off lumber lances and torturing their howling metal mounts. Pits Caudle was the stunt coordinator, which seemed a dangerous idea, considering his evident ignorance of movie stunt work.

I made myself inconspicuous behind Diane LaMotta, who was instructing the leading man. "Now he chases you up this dead-end slot, Sean, and you see it's too narrow to turn in. You've lost your two-by-four and you're trapped. You're in the foreground. You look around, see him coming down on you, look ahead. We cut in a shot of this plywood panel on the trash pile there – see, it's like a ramp. It's that or nothing, so you gun the bike and roar out of frame."

"Then what?"

"Then your stunt double shoots the ramp."

"No way, lady. The people pay to see *me* do that shit. It's only three or four feet anyway."

"I can't risk that. Now let's rehearse."

Mr. Wonderful caught her by the arm: "Look, girlie, you don't tell me what I do and what I don't. I'm going to start where he breaks my two-by-four. He swings; I swerve around him; then I make a clean approach and climb the ramp. All one shot."

"No."

"Then I walk. Here, hold up the bike." He flipped it at her so that she caught three hundred pounds of off-balance motorcycle and staggered as she fought to keep it upright. The leading man strolled away, but not so fast that she couldn't recall him.

LaMotta stared after him venomously, then checked her watch; squinted at the sun. "Okay; your way." She stood back and let the cycle drop.

Sean looked foolish as he tried to wrestle the bike up from the ground, while the crew swiftly positioned the camera to catch the action and then follow Sean over the plywood ramp. They read the light, threw some foreground fill from a reflector, and got ready to slate.

LaMotta crouched umpire-style behind the camera. "Places, people. Slate in."

The assistant cameraman spelled "27A-1" on his slate with lettered pieces of cloth tape while the property master handed Sean a duplicate of the two-by-four stud broken in the previous shot. The opposing biker gunned his motorcycle and skidded into his start position.

"Roll."

"Speed," from the sound man.

"Mark it."

"Twenty-seven apple, take 1." *Clack!*

"Give me some dust." A grip threw a double handful of dirt at the rear wheel of Sean's bike, filling the air with dust.

"Action."

The two knights revved their big Harley-Davidsons and snarled across the pocky clay, waving their wooden studs in clumsy left-handed arcs, since their right hands were needed for their handlebar throttles. The two-by-fours connected and Sean's snapped in half, as the property master had prepared it to do.

Fat Stogie tapped the dolly grip and the camera eased down its track toward the spot from which it would cover Sean's launch.

The bikers skidded around to face each other, revved again, and resumed the combat. As Sean's rival swung his stud, the star veered out of range, came back on course, howled past the camera in a cloud of choking dust, screeched up the plywood panel, and sailed out of sight over the trash pile.

Low Angles

“*Shiiiiit!*” Then a metallic racket like an avalanche of milk cans.

“Cut!”

I scrambled up the trash midden and stood looking down the other side. Two fifty-five-gallon drums were rolling to a stop, a third trembled on its side, and mighty Sean Parker lay half under his toppled cycle, screaming with pain.

The company swarmed around both sides of the trash pile, led by a skinny biker in a Willie Nelson headband: “My hog! You totaled it!”

“Get it off me!”

“You asshole, look at the fork. Look at the front wheel, Jesus!”

“*Get it off!*”

Four pairs of hands lifted the cycle and Sean sat up, still screaming. He clutched at his leg, which had suddenly acquired an extra, wrong-way knee.

He’d obviously landed on the fifty-five-gallon drums, which was intriguing, to put it mildly. The drums hadn’t been out there five minutes ago when I’d come around the back of the pile to avoid LaMotta’s eye.

The crew had cleared Sean’s landing area and leveled the ground to give his tires traction. But in the minutes while everyone was preoccupied on the other side of the trash pile, somebody had set Sean up for a broken leg – or worse.

And Sean, of course, was the star: the irreplaceable center of a full week’s footage. Without him, Diane LaMotta was out of business.

She watched impassively from the edge of the crowd as volunteers carted off the fallen knight, then threw both arms up in a “why me?” gesture, swivelled on her heel, and stalked away.