

Best Boy
By Mike L. Downey

“As they stepped onto the train, I fought every urge to jump on after them.”

The playback was still echoing through the train station when Gern’s voice rose above the sounds of the train moving and the milling crowds:

“Now what’s my motivation here again?”

“Cut!”

Marty the director managed to not sound the least bit put out from this latest interruption of his movie. Another voice yelled to stop the train and have it return to its origin. Yet another addressed the assembled extras for them to retrace their steps. Another day on a movie set. I sighed happily. Nowhere else I’d rather be since I was a little girl.

“His motivation is the \$15 million plus points on this picture,” I heard a voice mutter behind me. Caleb the complainer. He now stood beside me.

Gern and Marty were huddled together by the tracks several dozen bodies of the crew away. I always wished I could act – this is such a great script - but this is the closest I’ll ever get.

To answer Caleb, I tried my best Scarlet in a low tone like everyone else conversing around us – no cell phones allowed.

“Oh fiddle-dee, \$15 million, what a horrid cut in pay, simply ghastly,” I cooed. “How will Gern ever afford to keep his current lifestyle? The poor dear.”

“Ugh, Mona. That is the worst Judy Garland ever,” Caleb said.

“That was *not* Judy Garland, and you know it.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

“Everything fools a production assistant.”

Caleb actually sniffed before responding:

“I didn’t come over here to be insulted by the 3rd second assistant best boy.”

“I am the *2nd* second assistant best boy I’ll have you know.”

“Yeah, yeah. If they need someone to fetch an extension cord, they’ll give you a call.

‘Oh, best boy Stouffer, you should be in catering, yuk yuk.’ Come on. Can you point to *anything* you’ve done on this picture so far?”

Uhh. Wait, I know.

“See that spot atop the station?” I pointed. “It needed power for the exact lumens to accent Gern’s facial features for his closeup on this setup. Marty himself chose the brightness, and he pronounced it just right. That’s what I’ve done. So far. And another thing, your ‘best boy Stouffer’ comment borders on ableism. Quit hating on my name, Mr. Mund; it’s Stoford as you know.”

“Ableism? I don’t even know what that means. I love to eat,” Caleb said.

A few heads turned our way at that. We were murmuring too loud. Marty and Gern continued to confer by the tracks. The train was back in place. All those extras still were standing

around, waiting and talking quietly. Serena in financials told me a big-budget film like this costs thousands of dollars a second when not shooting. I love movies, but that's crazy.

"Hey, Earth to Mona, you do know I'm still here, right?"

"That's your second 'know' in two sentences," I said. "Don't you have some coffee to deliver or M&Ms to sort?"

"M&Ms? You're thinking rock bands now," Caleb said. "Hello, we are on a movie set."

I stared at Caleb with what I hoped was a withering Eastwood glare. Why is he being like this? Usually I like bantering with him, but this was different. And what's with the diss about my job? Is it flirting? I felt myself shudder. Then I remembered what the assistant gaffer intern had told me.

"Still have spit-cup duty, Mr. PA?" I whispered.

The look on Caleb's face was priceless. But then, his face turned to hurt, and I felt like a heel. He looked down before turning his now-impassive expression toward me.

"Who told you?" Caleb mumbled.

"Does it matter?" I replied. "You know a movie set is like a small town. Before long, everybody knows everybody else's business, no matter how hard you try to keep it under wraps. So Gern wants to quit smoking, and he's trying snuff. *Somebody's* got to keep him in cups. No secrets. Oh, remember his first stand-in and lead person Renato? The two were so intent on keeping their relationship private, and look what happened, trying to be alone on the third week of the shoot."

Caleb almost cracked a smile.

"Those two . . ." he began. "Trying for 'alone' time in Gern's trailer of all places. You'd think one of them would've thought 'I've got a bad feeling about this.'"

That made me snort, which got more heads turned in our direction. Marty and Gern were still convening by the tracks, but I could have sworn Gern shot a look my way. I hope not.

"Stop quoting movie lines to make me laugh," I hissed.

"Oh, yeah? 'Think you used enough dynamite there, Butch?'" Caleb breathed back.

"Come on. That doesn't even make sense."

"Okay, the knight in the Indiana Jones movie who says 'He chose . . . poorly.'"

I let out a big laugh. I love that line . . . uh-oh. The constant low talking all around us ceased as everyone – and I mean everyone – turned to look at me. Including Gern and Marty. This is not good, not good. Marty beckoned at me. I'm dead. I start walking toward the pair. They don't look happy.

Now I know why the police love making the bad guys do the "perp walk" so much. You feel every eye on you, and you feel like everyone knows you're guilty . . . even if all you did was laugh a bit loud.

I go to the actor and director with the extras to my left and the crew behind me. I stopped, took a deep breath. Marty spoke first.

"It's Stafford, right? Mona Stafford," Marty said.

Now I have to correct him. This'll be good.

"Half right, sir. Mona Stoford."

"Ah, yes, sorry. We were curious . . ." Marty started.

"So, 'Mona' I've been telling Marty that I'm just not getting it, and then I hear the crew laughing at me," Gern broke in.

"Oh no, sir. No one else is laughing at you . . ." I said.

"Just you. No one *else* besides you is laughing," Gern said.

"No, no sir. I wasn't laughing at you. I was just laughing at, just laughing."

"So, making this picture is a laughing matter to you?" Marty said.

I needed to stop talking before I got myself in deeper. I could feel my face and skin getting red, and I could still feel all those eyes on me. I took another deep breath and just shook my head.

"What do *you* think my motivation in this scene should be, Miss Stafford?" Gern asked.

This can't get any worse, so why not?

"You have two kinds of motivation here, Ger – Mr. Skotchdopole. One, you have so many amazing moments coming up that reference this scene. That should be enough. But need more? How about this? No scene will be easier than you looking at the train as the camera pans from your face to the train and back. Can't do that? Then this picture's never getting made, the producers will close us down, and we will become a trivia question for movie nerds until the end of time."

There, I got it out. Their faces – I can't tell what they're thinking. I did hear a few gasps behind me. I am so dead.

"You read the script, Mona," Gern said.

"Of course I did."

"I *do* have some amazing scenes ahead, and you are right – they all stem from this," Gern said.

I'm sure my mouth was wide open. If he had punched me, I would have been less surprised.

"The 'end of time' was a bit harsh though," Gern said with a slight smile.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Skotch . . ."

"Call me Gern, Mona."

"Yes, Gern. Sir."

Gern smiled bigger at that. He turned to Marty, clapped him on the shoulder.

"Let's shoot this scene, what do you say?"

Gern headed over to his makeup person. Marty watched him walk away and then turned to me.

"You're either very smart, very reckless, or very lucky – I can't figure out which," Marty said, which got a laugh from the crew.

My knees were weak with relief.

“Then I’m not fired?”

“No, you’re not fired. Gern’s probably going to get you a special credit. But from now on, stick to your job. Quietly. Okay?”

“Yes, sir.”

Marty turned to walk away, but stopped and whispered just to me.

“You’re wasted on the crew. Come see me after this. You need to be more behind the camera.”

I was dazed and barely heard the congratulations of the crew who had seconds ago been against me. Behind the camera. I couldn’t believe it. I barely saw the scene being set up once more when I heard Caleb behind me again.

“Bootlicker,” he whispered.

“Takes one to know one.”

“Ow, bullseye.”

A pause.

“Thanks for not mentioning me.”

“You would have done the same for me.”

“Always. Anytime.”

That was sweet. Maybe Caleb just needed practice flirting. There’s the bell.

“Action!”

End