

PROLOGUE:

Pissing off the United States Navy

The admiral's mad. At us. And this isn't just any old admiral. He's the Navy's Head of Undersea Warfare—the guy in charge of all our submarines at all our bases in all the oceans. What you might call a heavy hitter. And now he's taken a moment from keeping the world safe for democracy to confront a small band of guerilla filmmakers who've snuck on board his shiny new submarine. He's glaring daggers at Chris as Chris tries to vanish into the bulkhead behind him. Unfortunately, the bulkhead is solid steel, and Chris isn't going anywhere.

Biff Willard, our ex-Navy SEAL actor/associate producer, is at the sub's periscope clearly wishing he were somewhere else. I'm standing nearby, a 40-pound movie camera on my shoulder, smiling stupidly. But behind my calm facade, my brain is whirring, and a thorough analysis of the situation yields one simple conclusion: we're fucked.

The admiral has every right to be pissed. We're Sultan Film

Productions, the lowest of the low-budget action film companies, and we've scammed our way on board the *U.S.S. Freehold* to shoot footage for our latest movie. *Freehold* is a brand spanking new Ohio class SSBN (Submersible Ship, Ballistic, Nuclear)—one of those subs loaded with ICBMs that patrols the oceans six months at a stretch, ready to rain a radioactive apocalypse on whoever asks for it. Not really the kind of place most people would want a rogue gang of cinema guerrillas set loose.

We got on board through the use of clever deception and subterfuge, AKA lying our asses off. We're claiming to be a news crew shooting a "B-roll package for satellite uplink." Only this news crew is armed with a pair of cumbersome and very noisy 35mm motion picture cameras. Chris and Biff, who, for better or worse (and mostly it's worse), also act in our movies, are decked out in outfits as close to actual Navy uniforms as we can get without winning a dream vacation to Leavenworth.

So instead of running around with a camcorder interviewing the sub's crew, like any self-respecting news guys would do, we've been shooting Chris and Biff walking down passageways, coming through hatches, climbing down ladders, looking through the periscope, anything that looks cool and may fit somewhere into the military-action movie we're currently developing.

The PAO (public affairs officer) assigned to baby-sit us has no idea what in hell we're up to, but she doesn't really give a shit. We were given permission to be on board by someone higher up the chain of command, and as long as we don't break anything or accidentally launch a nuke, it isn't her problem.

So we're making out like bandits when the admiral spots us.

He's a tall guy, balding, with a beak nose you could open a can of pineapples on, and eyes like laser beams. He clearly doesn't like us up in the sub's control room, the nerve center of the ship, with two 35mm cameras grinding away. Since no one else is challenging us, he takes matters into his own hands and stalks over.

"So what, exactly, are you guys shooting?" he asks. His voice is black ice.

We stop dead in our tracks. Dicey questions from the crew or our PAO we

can handle. But the admiral is Moses and we've been caught sacrificing virgins to a golden calf.

Chris does his best. "News footage," he squawks. "B-roll package for satellite uplink." Chris is employing the *cloak of vagueness*, one of our standard tactics for dealing with people in authority asking sticky questions. It's supposed to work like that scene in *Star Wars* where Obi-Wan uses the Force to convince the storm troopers that they got the wrong droids. Chris figures that "B-roll package" and "satellite uplink," actual news terms, sound technical enough that no one will want to ask any more questions, lest we hurl more incomprehensible jargon at them.

But this isn't the admiral's first barbecue; not to mention the Armed Forces of the United States thrive on incomprehensible jargon. "So you guys are a news crew?" he asks. "Then why do you keep filming each other? And why are you using film cameras instead of video?"

So the admiral knows the difference between film and tape. We're doomed.

But he's not done. "I think we may have to confiscate your footage and have it security reviewed before we release it." His words drain the color from our faces and the hope from our hearts. If it were up to the admiral, we'd clearly be spending the rest of eternity in an icy hell.

Chris and I exchange sick looks. This is bad. I want to grab our cameras, our film and just run for it, a plan complicated by the fact that we're onboard a submarine doing a classified speed in excess of 20 knots, 100 feet underwater.

Time for a strategic retreat. Chris and I go into damage control mode, back pedaling, fast. "Sure, security review. Gotcha. No prob. Whatever you need, absolutely, nice weather we're having..." This is called the *hose-spu*. The *hose-spu* is the ancient art of saying whatever you think your antagonist wants to hear in order to get him the hell off your back so you can come up with a plan.

It works. When the admiral turns away for a nanosecond to answer a question from a crewman, we bolt for the relative safety of our

staging area, our triumphant excursion on a nuclear submarine blown all to hell.

After three years of scamming everyone and everything in sight, and getting away with it, I wonder if we've finally pushed too far.