

SHARK-INFESTED WATERS

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uncorrected excerpt

'Actors live in fear of being resented by their agents for taking ninety per cent of the money they earn'

Anon

I was on holiday in Spain with Judi Dench and her husband, Michael Williams.

During supper in Puerto Banus, Judi slipped away from the table and returned with a present for me.

A set of shark's teeth.

'*Dentadura de Tiburón,*' said Judi. 'Very appropriate for an agent. Put them on your desk.'

They've been there ever since.

Prologue

The trouble with St John's Church in Withyham was that it wasn't in Withyham. There was a church in Withyham but it wasn't St John's, which was in the middle of the Ashdown Forest, tucked away in the undergrowth. There were a lot of late arrivals at our wedding. The best man, Nigel Havers, arrived just as the service began, so there was no help from him in keeping the bridegroom calm and relaxed. The bride was late too, but not as late as the best man.

After the service, Nigel told me that he'd had a row with his wife Caro about routes, so much so that they had lost their way three times. His newly-wedded agent hoped that Nigel would calm down by the time he got to the reception.

There were more late arrivals at the reception held at Hilary's parents' house; and as I waited for the presentation queue to form, James Fox beckoned me over to the side of the marquee.

'Have you got a moment?' he asked. 'I just wondered if you'd heard back from Rose about the Spanish film?'

(Rose Tobias Shaw was an American casting director with a rather flaky reputation.)

'No I haven't, but I'm sure it will be fine.'

'It's a good part, don't you think? You liked the script, didn't you?'

'Absolutely, James.'

'And it is an offer, isn't it?'

'Sure,' I said.

Judi Dench stuck her head around the corner. 'Did you know there's a wedding reception going on in there, Michael?' she said and disappeared.

'Will the money be any good?' asked James.

'Well, I haven't actually talked ...'

Nigel appeared hot and flustered. 'We got bloody lost again. God, Caro's hopeless at navigating. I said Crowborough not Crowhurst. Are you ready to receive?'

'Absolutely,' I replied, 'see you in a moment.'

'Will I get top billing?' said James.

'I'm going to have to dash, James. Can we talk later?'

'Of course we can, Michael. You've got better things to do, I quite understand. But if you hear anything while you're away you will let me know, won't you?'

'Michael, come on,' said Nigel. 'The vicar is boring the pants off Tom Courtenay.'

'It must be a nightmare being an actors' agent,' said John Wells as I walked with him towards the marquee. 'Everyone pretending to be your friend when in fact all they want is for you to get them a decent job with loads of money.'

'No, no, John,' I replied, 'it's not a nightmare. I love actors. They're great.'

After the speeches, I was talking to a friend of Hilary's father.

'It must be very glamorous swanning around the world, visiting film locations,' he said.

'Yes, there is a bit of that, but most of it's pretty humdrum and boring; a bit like working in a bank.'

'I'm a bank manager actually, and I find it very interesting,' he replied. 'I've just been having a long chat with Nigel Havers' father's bodyguard who's thinking of changing banks. Charming man. Now there's an interesting job, bodyguard to the Lord Chancellor.'

My mother Nora had of course come to the wedding and spent most of the day looking for Stewart Granger. She'd never wanted me to be an agent. 'Mucking about with actors won't get you anywhere, dear,' she used to say. 'Get yourself a proper job.'

She was bitterly disappointed that I never completed my articles with Williams & James, Solicitors of Gray's Inn; failed my Bar exams; and drifted in and out of various media jobs. It was my lazy streak coming through, she used to say. In any case, she definitely didn't like the notion of my being an agent, and it was only when she heard I was representing Stewart Granger that she began showing some interest in the whole thing. She loved Stewart Granger – though probably not as much as he loved himself – and adored all his films: *The Man in Grey*, *King Solomon's Mines*, *Scaramouche*, *Bhowani Junction*. Now there was a *real* film star.

Unfortunately Granger didn't turn up at the wedding – maybe he got lost – so Nora had to make do with Sandy Gall, another great favourite of hers, but not quite in the same league.

I bumped into Anton Rodgers on my way to the house to change.

'Great wedding, Mike! Remind me where you're going on honeymoon? Sardinia, isn't it?'

'No, the Seychelles, actually, but we're spending a couple of nights in Bath first.'

'Do you mind if I have your numbers ... y-you know, just in case?'

'Of course, ring me any time.'

'Well I won't disturb you unless it is something urgent. To be honest I need a job. You know it's been three months since I finished the series. I thought this was going to be a really good year but it's turning out to be a disaster.'

As we were changing there was a knock at the door.

‘We’ve got to dash Michael,’ said Nigel. ‘We’re spending the weekend with the parents in Suffolk and at this rate we’ll be there at midnight. I’m going to let Caro drive and do my own navigating this time. Give me a call next week ... you never know, we might have heard back from ITV.’

On our way to The Priory Hotel in Bath, I mused on John Wells’s remarks and the fine line between client and friend. Were any of these people really my friends? Or were they just fair-weather friends? Well, maybe not friends for life but certainly friends for the life of their next contract.

As Hilary and I lay on the bed talking about the day and getting ready for our first night of wedded bliss, a note was slipped under the door.

Rose had called and left a message. They had gone with Lloyd Bridges, but would David be interested in playing the friend? She’d ring me in the morning.

I turned out the light.