

A HEROES OF HOLLYWOOD BOULEVARD ONE SHOT

# HELL IS FOR HEROES

The Nevada air burned hot as it whizzed by Cheryl's tired complexion. The sky was a fantastically unrealistic orange, as though the sun had called time on mankind's bullshit and was coming down to scorch us from existence. Through a glance towards the wing mirror, Cheryl stared back at herself - a stranger.

Somewhere just across state lines, where cactus outnumbered people three-to-one, she had picked up some cheap hair dye. Turning those thick dark locks yellow, she single-handedly proved that *not all* blondes have more fun. The boys laid motionless in the backseats.

*God-damn you, Stu*, she thought. Seeing him disappear in their dust sent the twins into volcanic fits of tears. Seat-bashing, and screaming, and matching red faces that would haunt Cher as she raced from the scene and everything she once called "life". The three-hundred-K living in the trunk was worthless. Her kids' hearts were broken. Her's was feeling pretty fucking foolish. To think, she'd let herself believe that for everything they'd been through *life owed her and Stu a solid shot at happiness*.

'Owed.' Cher sighed to herself under her breath. Owed was Stu talking. She knew better than to believe that the world owed her anything other than seven square days of fuckery per week. She must have really wanted it for her to trick herself into believing that she was owed anything. A frightening thought came to her, so *what am I owed now?*

Shaking it from her mind, the newly blonde mother of two spotted a motel racing from the horizon towards her left-hand-side. Crawling, she killed the lights and eased up round back before getting from the vehicle and locking the sleep-drunk kids in. Cheryl walked to the office with gators in her gut. She'd intentionally avoided listening to the news, even though she knew it could probably help her. Where they looking for her? What had happened to Stu?

Entering the motel's office, Cheryl dinged on the bell and thanked the Lord above that the 12 inch TV set mounted in the corner of the room was on *Jeopardy*.

'How's about it?'

'How's about what?' she replied, her voice unsure.

'Your day? How's about it?'

'Long. Dry. Sandy. You got any rooms?'

'Smoking or non-smoking?'

'Non, I got...' *don't mention the kids. The news could have mentioned the kids.* 'Issues... I got issues with cigarette smoke.'

'Room 31's you, then.' the un-ironed old motel-keep said handing her, her key.

Cheryl placed the dollars down, drawing a look of mistrust from the old guy.

'We need a credit card to hold against damages.'

'I don't have a credit card, sir. I got cash.'

'Well then you'd best find someplace else to...'

'Look. How's about I give you two hundred dollars as a security deposit. It's unlikely I'd do two hundred dollars worth of damage to your room, right?' His nod said *suppose*. 'Then when I check out, you can keep one-hundred of it... you know... for the trouble of me not having a credit card or nothing.'

Normally, Ralf would have said *no* but the money was there. It was in his hand and she didn't look the type to get coked up and punch a gloryhole in the bathroom door.

'You in trouble, Miss?'

'What makes you think I'm in trouble?'

'Just something that seems to sit right in me, is all.'

'I'm relocating for work. Given up a crap job in San Diego for a better one in Vegas. I just need a night or two where I get some shut eye before the U-Haul arrives. That's all.'

'Room 31's at the end of the lot. If you need anything hit zero on the phone. Turn-down service is between seven and eleven-AM.'

Rather than wake the boys Cheryl carried them into the room one at a time. Locking up, she drove their car to the edge of town and walked back. If anything was likely to trip her up it was *that vehicle*. Better that it sat a mile away than right outside their room, telegraphing for any cop with at least one good eye where she was.

The cool air-conditioned unreality of Room 31 hit Cher, turning her constitution to shattered glass. She raced to the bathroom before violently exploding the contents of her stomach into the green porcelain toilet. The eruption was vicious enough that it woke Gene.

'Mommy.' his little voice was uncertain.

'Mommy's ok, baby. Go back to sleep it's still late.'

'Why did Dad not come with us?'

Wiping the corners of her mouth, Cheryl returned to the room and took up at the side of the bed. She brushed the hair from the eyes her ex-husband had given their son.

'Sometimes... no matter how much you want something... sometimes it just doesn't work that way.'

'Do you and Dad not love each other enough?'

'Sweetheart, me and your father love each other so much. If it wasn't for each other we'd not have you two. There's no way I could never not love him because he gave me you and your brother. Your Dad's had to stay behind in LA to deal with something that happened a few months back.'

'Do you think he'll come whenever it's all sorted?'

Cher's bottom lip betrayed her; shaking and refusing any level of control she attempted to enforce upon it. Gene's hand came to her face, catching several stray tears.

'Don't cry.'

'I'm going to need you and your brother's help with stuff in a while.' she said. 'You should get some sleep. That way you're at your best and able to help.'

'I love you.'

'I love you too, Gene.' a kissed added almost as a full-stop.

Gene went straight out the moment he lay down. Making herself a coffee with the facilities, Cher grabbed the TV remote and forced herself to poke the power button.

They were everywhere. Every channel was carrying the arrest of three "Hollywood Heroes" for the Santa Monica Bank, USA heist. Her hand shook as the reporter was about to go into graphic detail of the events that had transpired on Hollywood Boulevard earlier that day. Events that were happening as she sat, parked up, waiting on Stu and this "fresh start" that was never coming their way.

'It was at this point that Stuart Hogan, popularly know as the Hollywood Batman, attempted to make off with close to half a million dollars.'

*Three-hundred thousand!* she chided internally.

'Bob, is it right that LAPD are still attempting to locate the money from the Bank, USA heist?'

Cheryl hit mute as suddenly she remembered what was sitting in the trunk of her car. It was one thing not to get a "fresh start" with Stu, but it was something altogether completely different to lose her freedom because she was trying to keep hold of something all of California law enforcement was looking for. If it went Federal... *shit*. If the Secret Service weighed in. The FBI. The U.S. Marshalls or someone else she couldn't think of... *shit*.

*But what choice do you have?*

The cops *must* know by now that they're looking for Stu's ex-wife. They're bound to be able to have put two-and-two together when they called to her house and nobody was there. Her train of thought came off the rails as several packages were pulled out of the La Brea Tar Pits.

Ever so gently, she tapped on the volume button.

*The bodies of Bank, USA manager William Corrigan, his wife Aideen and two children Louise and Jake have been exhumed from the La Brea Tar Pits where Hogan, Costano and Barnett buried them. The District Attorney Chip Haer, when questioned, had this to say...*

'The horrific crimes perpetrated here by these three men warrant the strictest possible punishment. Murder is a stain on the fabric of humanity. The murder of an entire family, including two children... that is the most hideous stain of them all.'

'Will your office be seeking the death penalty?'

'That's yet to be determined.'

'And what about the murders of Colin Spence, Ronan O'Hara and Claudette Dreary?'

'I can't comment on those individual cases at this moment. Thank you.'

As Cheryl watched the case against Stu snowballed. Soon she was feeling that *his* sins had become *her* sins... and they were considerable. Seven counts of murder were still on the table. Armed robbery. Kidnapping. Unlawful imprisonment. Desecration of a corpse. Conspiracy.

How could she run?

Then again, how could she not?

Take the boys back to Los Angeles, and have any school they're put into know "they're that killer Batman's kids". What kind of a future does that give them? Three-hundred-grand could buy them a new future in Mexico. A future that didn't involve them having to live with the stigma of having a Dad sitting on Death Row, waiting for his trip to the fun-chair. As she bounced between stay and go in the whirlwind of her mind, Stu stared out from her TV as the LAPD per-pwalked all three men in front of the cameras en-route to lock-up.

'I need some air.' she told the room.

Standing on the cusp of a dust covered world Cheryl watched as the sun dropped out of sight for the evening. The day had put ten years on her tyres. How many more mammoth days were in her diary?

*What the hell were you thinking, girl?*

Every time she thought of Stu, she felt foolish. Every time she thought of their "fresh start" a wave of embarrassment smacked up against her. *Silly little girl*. She'd told herself the day she filed for divorce that she was through with silly little flights of fancy. Even Bradley being a musician was enough for her to give second thought to beginning a relationship with him. Jump forward a few years and all of a sudden she was making whole new mistakes with the same old person.

A beaten up old Honda pulled up outside the room next to hers. For a moment her heart *leapt*. For a moment she anticipated Stu; exiting the vehicle, breathless and panting.

'Good Evening.' said the tall black stranger.

'Evening.'

'You ok?'

'Sorry?' Cheryl's throat was fit for strangling itself.

'You look upset is all.'

'It's been a long day.'

'Tomorrow's a new one.'

'I hope so.'

The man walked towards his room, stopped for a moment and turned. 'I was going to have a beer or two before bedding down. You fancy a cold one?'

'My...' *don't say kids* 'my kid is asleep in the room.'

'We can have them out here. You can keep an ear out.'

Cher nodded. As the ex-wife of one of the "Hollywood Heroes", the kindness of strangers was the most she could hope for.

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The Coors coated her tongue, calming the jitters that had been turning her stomach since fleeing from Hollywood. Jerry had a warm smile. It was buttery. If only he knew the calibre of person he was dealing with. Jerry the kind-hearted listener was sharing hops with a woman who was happy to invite another female into her marital bed. A woman who was happy to turn a blind eye to her (ex) husband robbing a bank. Morally grey enough to have an inclination that *something* had happened to the bank manager and his family but enough importance of self not to ever *really* know for sure.

As she weighed her crimes, Cheryl couldn't help but feel like maybe her perp-walk in front of the National news was owed to her.

'So what're you running from?' Jerry asked, sipping on his beer.

'Running? Nothing. What do you mean?'

'Everyone's running from something, Maxine.' her fake name sounded stupid aloud. 'You look at the best American literary fiction. You look at the road movie. We're all running from something. Me, I got a life I no longer fit into.'

'No longer fit into'

'Army. Just did two tours of Afghanistan. Before that I was in Iraq, living in squalor in some two-bit border town where you had to burn your own shit because we had no working toilets. I spent the last three years of service fixated on all the things I was going to do when I got back home. Then when I get there... life had moved on. My girl's married off to someone else, all my boys have set up their own lives. It's like I'd been on time-out for ten years.'

'So where you gonna go?' Cheryl tapped out one of Jerry's cigarettes, pressed it to her lips and put the flame to it.

'For the first time in my life I don't know. New York, maybe. I figured if I bunked here for a day or two I could let my brain catch up with my feet. Maybe there's an answer in there somewhere.'

'My marriage fell apart.'

Jerry lit another cigarette. 'I'm sorry to hear that.'

'We married early. Before we'd done our growing, you know?' *nod* 'Things got bad... bad enough for a divorce and then right when I thought I was done with him there he was again.'

'You get back together with him?'

'Almost. We made plans... which in a lot of ways is worse than letting them back into your bed.'

'Plans are the worst, girl. You let him back into your heart.'

'None of it was worth a shit though. He's gone now, and I'm left with a world of shit to clean up.'

'How long ago?'

'Yesterday.'

'Damn. That is fresh. I wouldn't go making any life changing decisions if I were you.'

'Don't have a choice. He saw to that.'

Ralf left the office and walked across the forecourt to his car. As it pulled out from the motel he caught sight of Cheryl and Jerry, sitting side-by-side over beers and cigarettes. Cher caught a glare from his peepers and felt busted on her smoking lie.

'I better get to bed. Thanks for the beers... and the cigarettes... and the company.' laughed Cheryl. Jerry nodded *you're welcome*, got to his feet and shook her hand.

'It's pretty raw at the moment, Maxine but hang in there. You'll get through it.'

Cheryl slotted the door gently back into its frame and breathed a sigh of relief. It was good to have had human interaction. To look into another's eyes and not feel fear. Kicking off her shoes, Cheryl caught a glimpse of the TV. Regardless of what else was going on in the world, the 24-hr coverage was all about Hollywood Boulevard, the robbery, the murders, the arrests, and the interviewing of just about every single neighbour Stu, Brian and Ricky had in their lives.

The good work Jerry had done was quickly being eroded. Cher reached for the remote and was about to punch down on the power button when a photograph of Stu and her appeared on screen. Her heart stopped, and then even though her TV set was on mute she could hear the muffled tones of the news anchor.

'Los Angeles Police are interested in talking with Hogan's ex-wife, Cheryl, 36, in relation to the unaccounted for two-hundred and seventy-three thousand dollars taken from Bank, USA some two months ago. Lead Detective Sara Dalton has asked that anyone knowing the location of Ms. Hogan call their tip line...'

*Fuck.*

Even with the bad dye job. Even at night, covered in desert dirt through beer goggles there was no mistaking it. Maxine from Santa Ana was Cheryl Hogan, LAPD person of interest.

Grabbing hold of Gene and Ozzy, Cheryl gently shook them from their sleep.

'Mommy.' Ozzy yawned.

'I need you both to get dressed sweethearts. Mommy is going to go get the car, I want you to be ready to go in five minutes.' Cheryl ran towards the door. 'Don't open the door for anyone... no matter who knocks, ok?'

'Ok.'

'Ok.'

Cheryl sprinted off into the cooling desert noir. Her heart racing in her chest. There was a chance she was being a little too sensitive. Yeah, Jerry had the news on but that wasn't a guarantee that he was watching it; or that he recognised her. He could have been brushing his teeth or passed out already... or he could be on the phone to the cops.

*I can't run. Not with two kids.*

*You can't not run. You go to jail for having this money and who is going to raise the boys?*

With the key in the ignition, Cheryl woke the Station Wagon from its slumber. She jammed the stick into 'D' and tore ass back to the roadside motel

where hopefully Ozzy and Gene were waiting. Jerry was nowhere to be seen and there were no red and blue flashing lights sparking up the dark Nevada sky.

She pulled up hard outside her room; kicking dirt and a dust cloud up into the air. Jerry's light was off but the glow of the TV danced across the drapes.

'Get in the car.' Cher instructed as she threw their bags into the trunk of the vehicle. Closing the motel room door, she slipped the key under the mat and leapt into the driver's seat. Jerry's motel room door opened as she turned the nose of the vehicle around to point towards their escape route. She caught sight of Jerry for an instant.

There was a look in his eyes that stung her.

Pity.



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