

COURT OF COSTUMES

I

With the money gone and the lead Detective in the ground it was little surprise to Stu that the State took his deal away. His time in Central Booking had been nightmarish. He still had trial and his sentence to live out, but before that he had to make it there. Unsurprisingly, the Judge at his bail hearing denied the defence's motion and ordered *that the defendant be held for trial in a facility that reflected the seriousness of the charges.*

The handcuffs no longer chafed Stu's wrists. They were working their way into a groove. He swallowed hard as two correctional officers took charge of him under the arm, walking his manacled frame from the courthouse to "the wagon" where he would be transported to Pelican Bay State Prison.

Super Max.

WEEKS LATER

He woke with an incomparable dryness in the back of his throat. Stu made an attempt to cover his mouth before coughing only for his arms to snap back to his side. Opening one chubby purple eye, he saw the sunlight dance across the sleek silver of the restraint. As he opened his other eye he saw the doctor, two other inmates and Brucie, the largest guard on his wing... clutching the biggest pump-action shotgun that'd ever been made.

'You're having quite the time of it, Mr. Hogan.' Doc Strano observed, signing off a chart with a flamboyant stroke of his pen. 'The inmate brought in with you said you didn't even attempt to defend yourself. Should I be...'

'I'm no martyr, Doc. And I'm no crackpot suicide either. There was four of them... even the smallest one was bigger than me. I figured why make it worse? Take the licking that's coming to you.' As he breathed his chest whistled, something was out of place inside.

'You've three broken ribs and a bruised kidney. You're going to be in some discomfort passing liquids for the next couple of days. I'm going to ask that you stay here for observation.'

'That ain't necessary, Doc.' Brucie piped up. 'There's not much you can do for ribs, and a little blood in your pee never hurt anyone.'

'It's not his pee I'm worried about hurting him.'

'Can I have a word with you, Doctor Strano? Outside.'

The Doc flushed red, then white. Stu closed his eyes and savoured the last few moments of peace before he went back to walking around with a target on his trunk. Labelled *the worst* in a place designed to house the worst of the worst.

As Stu turned his head to the side he watched with wonder as a heavily tattooed Mexican inmate fiddled around with his restraints. The tattoo-skulled gangbanger contorted his hands left, then right before he pulled a sliver of metal from parts unknown and began working the lock on his handcuffs.

Click... click.

The restraints were off. The Mexi was on his feet. Suddenly to Stu, his fellow patient's injuries looked more placed than anything. He had nothing about him that impeded his agility, his movement. In-fact he was over to the hospital ward's drawers and back at his bed before Stu could blink either of his fat eyes. A cold rush enveloped Stu when he saw the sunlight smirk on the tip of the scalpel.

'Hey man, what the fuck is this?' Stu's voice rattled.

'Ricky Roids says *bon voyage* you rat muthafucka!'

'HELP!'

The gangbanger lunged at Stu as the former Hollywood Batman roared for assistance. As much as Brucie disliked Hogan, as much as he *really* wanted to see the scumbag in pain, he didn't want it on his watch. There was too much fucking paperwork to complete when an inmate got his clock punched. Breaching the room, his firearm suddenly live and trained on the Mexican assassin, Brucie gave fair warning.

'Drop it, Garcia! Now!'

The former Sergeant of the LA chapter of The Devil Boys looked the armed guard over. Taking a measure of Brucie's sincerity, Garcia came to the conclusion that this *white muthafucka would drop him quicker than a prom date who didn't fuck.*

'You got three seconds before I put you down. One!'

'Ok. Ok, I gotcha.' Garcia said, relinquishing the blade and slowly placing his hands on his head.

The moment Stu's would-be killer was disarmed Strano hit the panic button. The corners of the room flashed and wailed as Crescent City's correctional facility went into lockdown. A sea of guards rushed the treatment room. Two of them were on Garcia in an instant; pinning him to the ground, applying a little bit of unreasonable force so he knew they were serious before he was cuffed, lifted and dragged off to face the Warden.

'Uncuff Hogan, Lou.' spat Brucie. 'Congratulations, you're going to live in Protective Custody.'

II

P.C. made Stu's skin crawl. There were no saints in this place but in Protective Custody he had little choice but to hold the mirror up. These people were

disgusting. Rapists. Child molesters. The odd dirty cop, and him... a rat. Everything about his life was separate. Exercise time was separate from the other inmates. Meal time was separate again, and cold. Cold, because by the time the food had been checked for poisons and bits of broken glass it had been fingered more times than Chasey Lane.

It had barely been a fortnight since he had arrived in Pelican Bay. Yet it was a life-sentence already. A life-sentence before he had even reached trial. Without giving much consideration to it, Stu pawed a lump of cold mash potato from his plastic plate, shovelled it into his mouth and swallowed. The less chewing that was involved in meal time, the nicer it was.

'HOGAN!' called a guy.

Stu stood to attention.

'Back to the bars, hands up-turned through the hatch.

He presented himself the way he was instructed. Stu's mind raced ahead of his fear. He was being taken somewhere. Was he being moved? Transferred? Taken down to the boiler room to fight to the death? What a fucking time to think about Van Damme movies.

As the cell door opened Stu took a step back and waited to be told to exit. When he was, he did.

The guard walked Stu through the arteries of the prison in complete silence. *If this was his murder, he thought, he could have made it a little subtler.* Coming to a checkpoint they stopped, waited, and then continued on when the gate buzzed them through.

At the end of a long, cold corridor sat an expectant room. Placing Stu inside, the guard undid the prisoner's restraints and stood watch over him. After a few moments the sound of expensive leather shoes tapping on tile alerted Stu that someone was coming to see him.

District Attorney Chip Haer breezed into the room with the confidence of a Rock Star at an orgy. He had every right to such swagger. As D.A. he had a perfect record in cases he tried. So much so that the unusually frosty relationship between the D.A.'s office and the Police Department had warmed up to the level of heavy petting.

'Stuart.' grinned Haer. 'How are the ribs?'

'Five by five. To what do I owe the pleasure?'

'Richard Bennett. Your old P.I.C from the boulevard. He's put a price on your head.'

Stu laughed. 'With what? All his money got blown out of the A.C. units at the Hollywood and Highland.'

'Which you know, and I know... but the piece of shit he's convinced to shiv you a new asshole... sadly, he doesn't.'

'Shit.'

Chip finally took his seat. He had a well-practiced opening stance when breaking down the will of inmates. 'Just because I plan on getting you convicted doesn't mean I want to see harm come to you. I'm in the Justice business. I've no vendetta here.'

'What do you want?'

'You know what I want, Stu. Testimony and the outstanding two hundred and seventy-something grand.'

'I can't give you that.'

'Then you'll bleed to death one morning before breakfast.'

'I'm in Protective Custody.'

'The problem with running into a room with one way in, is that there's only one way out. You think the gangs in here can't get to you in P.C?'

'I don't have the money.'

'But your wife does, right?'

'Ex-wife.' *Nice work Stu. That's the point to make.*

'I don't want to see your kids go into the system. Have her come in and I can swing her immunity in exchange for her testimony.'

'I'm meant to believe that after you pulled my previous deal?'

The conversation was going so straight that it always felt scripted to Haer.

'Actually, the fine people at the Los Angeles Police Department pulled that deal. The death of one of their Detectives put them in a less generous mood. Look, Stuart. I have you. I can make the case. I have criminal conspiracy. It means I don't have to prove you committed any of the murders. I just have to prove *one* of you committed them in order to charge all three of you.'

'Then why are you here?'

'It's my job to make the tightest case possible. To secure the best conviction I can. I know you didn't kill anyone. I know you committed a felony, but you don't deserve to be in Super Max. I'm pushing for the death penalty on these murders. I know you didn't commit any of them, so I'd like for you to not to have to pay for them but if it's a choice between all of you or none of you. I'm taking all.'

Stu's heart leapt to his mouth. Haer had enough to fry them all. The fact that he was throwing him a lifeline was Samaritan sized. But how could he give them Cheryl? How could he when he had no idea where the hell she was?

'Mr. Haer, I'd love to help you but I don't...'

'I offered. My conscience is clear, Stuart. I'll see you in court.' Haer said stoney-faced as he rose from his chair.

'I'm telling you the truth. I have no idea where Cheryl is. If I did, I would tell you. But I don't.'

'That's unfortunate.'

'I'll testify. You want me to take the stand, I'll take the stand. Just get the death penalty away from my head and get me out of here.'

'I'll be back in a few days with the transfer documents. In the meantime, you need to get to thinking about how you're going to reach out to your wife... sorry, ex-wife.'

III

The guard had brought him two sheets of A4 paper and a felt pen. Stu's handwriting looked almost remedial when the chunky fat black lines dried on the thin slivers of legal pad. He had no *real* way of reaching Cheryl. Their plan was to get across the border and keep going until they reached somewhere non-extradition. If she had followed the plan she was probably long gone. Then

again, with the Feds looking for her, the cops on to their plans, and Cher having to do it alone... maybe it all added up to enough to slow her down.

It took Stu the guts of a day to figure out a way of making contact with his wife. How do you communicate with someone who's outside of the reaches of communication? That's when he realised it, and how painfully poetic it was. He had used his comic book persona to commit a great wrong. It was that same comic connection he'd use to bring his family home. Stop them from having to run and insure that he, at least, got to live out the rest of his life. Even if it were behind bars. At least he'd have a chance to make amends to his children.

DEAR OZZY,

I CAN ONLY HOPE THAT IN THE MIDST OF SO MUCH UPHEAVAL THAT THIS ONE RITUAL REMAINS IN YOUR LIFE, IT'S MY JOB AS YOUR DAD TO PROTECT YOU, NURTURE YOU, AND TEACH YOU RIGHT FROM WRONG, I'M SORRY THAT I'VE FAILED SO COMPLETELY IN ALL OF THIS AND I HOPE THAT ONE DAY YOU GROW UP TO BE THE MAN YOU DESERVED AS A FATHER, I KNOW I DON'T DESERVE TO ASK A FAVOR BUT I NEED YOU TO DO SOMETHING FOR ME, TELL YOUR MOM IT'S OK TO COME HOME, TELL HER DAD HAS FIXED THINGS SO THE THREE OF YOU CAN LIVE AS A FAMILY, SHOW HER THIS IF YOU NEED TO, I'M SORRY, CHER, SOMEWHERE OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS I LOST WHO I AM, I LOST SIGHT OF WHAT'S IMPORTANT IN LIFE, I WON'T ASK FOR YOUR FORGIVENESS, I COULD NEVER PUT YOU IN A POSITION WHERE YOU FELT LIKE YOU HAD TO ACCEPT IT, I JUST NEED YOU TO UNDERSTAND THAT WHAT I DO, I DO FOR YOU,

LOVE, DAD

The entrance to the Protective Custody wing opened and in walked Ricky with the help of two guards. He'd seen better days. His nose had been put in an unflattering side-shade while his lip sat fatter than a horse's walt. Opening up the cell across from Stu's, Ricky limped in before dropping down hard on his cot.

He whistled when he breathed through his nose now. Someone had worked him over good and proper. Stu folded his letter in half, tucked it between a book and walked to the bars. He peered across the wing as Ricky slicked his wounds in front of the mirror.

'This doesn't change a thing.' Ricky snarled. 'I'm still gonna kill you.'

'Looks like your friends found out you don't have any money. Guess you're no better than any other child killer now.'

Ricky squared up and wedged himself against the bars. For a moment Stu worried that the big guy might just push right through them. The look in his eyes was different to the standard roid rage, bullshit bravado the juicer dealt in. Ricky looked genuinely scared.

'Brian should have did you that night he had the chance.'

'Make peace, Rick.'

'With you? Fuck you!'

'Not with me... you think I give a shit about what you think of me? Make peace with yourself. With what you've done. Where you're going.'

As the door to the wing opened again, Stu retrieved his letter. Tucking it into his shirt pocket he stood up straight and waited to be told to *back up against the bars*.

The cuffs clicked into place before Stu was helped to his feet and guided out of Protective Custody. He'd taken the long walk to meet Haer so many times he was convinced he could walk it blindfolded. As Stu stepped into the room Haer wore a look of concern on his face. It brought a matching complexion from Stu.

'What is it? Is it my deal? I have the letter here. You put it in his comic and Ozzy will read it.'

'We've got her, Stu.'

'What?'

'Sheriff's Deputies picked her up in El Paso. They're transporting her back to Los Angeles as we speak.'

'What's that mean?'

'It's all over the news, Stuart. It's going to be almost impossible to wave the charges against her.'

'No. That wasn't the agreement.' Stu barked, putting his guard on notice.

'The *agreement* was that you got her to surrender.'

'Which I did!' Stu waved his letter frantically. Everything was coming apart at the seams. 'Please... don't do this... she's done nothing wrong.'

'She's knowingly in possession of two-hundred-thousand dollars in stolen currency. She's done something wrong.'

'You want me to testify? Get her off!!'

Haer grabbed himself two mits worth of Hogan and tossed the red-faced convict up against the wall before pushing his forearm across Stu's throat.

'You'll testify or you're back to Gen Pop with the death penalty over your head.' The D.A. released Stu, who dropped to the ground and scrambled for his breath. 'I'll honour our deal. You're being transferred to a maximum security facility in Nebraska after sentencing.'

'Nebraska...' a pine went through his heart.

'Cheryl's looking at jail time. I can arrange for you to make a phone call to your parents. If they can take the boys it means they can visit you... if you like.'

He wanted to thank Haer but couldn't. It stung. The District Attorney's moment of consideration towards Stu was greater than anything he'd managed to offer his own family. The family he'd destroyed and tore apart before disappearing to Nebraska.

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