SOAP-STUD & BLUE-MOVIE GIRL

stories of Hollywood

by

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for Katherine M. and the KBO gang

A note from the author

This is a novel – so, reader, expect to meet people you don't know, as well as some that you do know who hopefully will enjoy being press-ganged into this collaboration. You will also meet people you thought were dead (a not uncommon occurrence in the City of Angels). Some of your favorite stars have disappeared from pictures you remember to provide casting opportunities for resurrected players. Oscars and other awards have been re-allocated. I have also reopened studios and restaurants that closed down long ago in the real Hollywood.

If there is – or ever was – a 'real' Hollywood.

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SOAP-STUD

1. Wicket, WY

‘That boy’s so god-darned cute he’s gonna be a movie star,’ his grandmother predicted when the boy in question was barely two weeks old.

‘That boy’s gonna be sheriff of this here town,’ countered the boy’s pa who was, as had been pa’s pa and grandpa, the town sheriff.

That boy’s ma, nursing the black eye which she often did after the sheriff had sustained heavy losses at his weekly poker game, failed to join in this speculation about the future of her firstborn son. After eleven months of marriage she dreamt only of getting herself and her blue-eyed black-haired baby out of this here town.

The blue eyes came from his mother, the blonde daughter of third-generation Swedish Americans. Marlene was small but busty – cheerleader cute if none too bright (especially when it came to choosing a husband).

Sheriff John Howell III, known as ‘Jack’, was tall and craggily handsome in a Randolph Scott sort of way. His hair was dark, but not the jet-black ‘Junior’ was blessed with – ‘*Injun*’ hair, some of the townspeople would whisper (out of earshot of Jack Howell, who was capable of killing anyone who suggested that anything other than hundred percent WASP blood ran in his or his son’s veins). Perhaps some ancestor of the sheriff had married him a squaw.

Cornflower eyes, jet-black hair. Jason’s fortune was already made.

‘This here town’ is Wicket (pop. 889 in March 1974 with the addition of John Howell IV) in NE Wyoming, on the western fringe of the Black Hills and the Bad Lands. The township’s name is an obvious corruption of ‘wicked’, its origin either dating from the era of Prohibition and Bonnie & Clyde or from the

great westward march of the Early Settlers (the latter distinctly improbable since the graveyard boasts no headstone earlier than 1880).

Before it became the birthplace of Jason Howl, only one thing distinguished Wicket from a hundred other Nowheresville pit stops on the tourist trail between Yellowstone, the Devil's Tower and Mount Rushmore. The nearest mountain produces a gushing cold spring of premium purity. If you order a bourbon and branch water anywhere west of Kansas City, there's a twenty-five percent chance that the water hails from Wicket. The town makes its own bottles as well as supplying their content. In 1974, pre-computerization, the bottle-making plant and the bottling plant between them employed almost half the town's population including, prior to the birth of her son, Marlene Andersen Howell.

The beatings had started on their wedding night when Jack Howell knocked Marlene off the bed for not being a virgin, too drunk to remember that he'd deflowered her six months earlier. He then hauled her back onto the bed and resumed conjugal relations with enough vigor to make her bleed. In the morning he was too hung-over to attach any significance or guilt to the blood-stained sheets.

By the time Junior was two, his mother's bruises and black eyes had escalated to intermittently fractured cheekbones, cracked ribs and a twice-broken wrist. Jack wanted a big family and forbade the use of the Pill, but Marlene made sure he was impotent-drunk during her most fertile days. Another baby would make escape harder.

'I'm leaving him,' she told her mother who'd never received so much as a harsh word from her gentle and gentlemanly high-school teacher husband in twenty-one years of marriage. They had been 'peaceniks' during the Vietnam years.

Had Alzheimer's not struck him down in his early fifties, Marlene's father

would surely not have tolerated the sheriff courting his eighteen-year-old daughter. He'd always viewed John Howell III as a near-as-makes-no-difference-fascist like John Howell II. A few months before her wedding, on what he must have thought of as one of his 'good days' and his wife the exact opposite, Marlene's father jumped to his death from the fire-station tower; he left no note. Her brother-in-law gave her away when she married Jack Howell whom she now, three years later, intended to leave.

'Are you sure about this?' her mother asked. 'Junior needs a daddy.'

'Not one who beats him, he doesn't.'

'He's beating the boy now?'

'Not yet. But it's a matter of when, not if. I'll find him a better daddy someplace else. Ingrid says I can go to her.' Her sister, two years older, had married a Californian she'd met on holiday.

'Marlene, honey, don't you leave too. I couldn't bear it here without you.'

'You can come to California with me and Junior.'

'Baby, you know I can't leave your daddy.' Mom took flowers to her husband's grave each Wednesday morning and refreshed the water after church every Sunday. 'Give me time to get used to the idea of you going. Give me a year. Promise me you'll stay one more year.'

Marlene sighed a deep sigh that pained her newly re-cracked ribs and gave a promise that she would only have to keep for seven months. Five weeks after Junior's third birthday a massive coronary sent his maternal grandma to join her beloved husband in Boot Hill, as the sheriff and his buddies called the cemetery with predictably crass Bad Lands humor.

Marlene let four weeks go by, taking flowers to the grave on each of the Wednesdays, changing the water on Sundays. Ingrid had come from San Diego for the funeral and the packing-up of the family home. She confirmed her offer of sanctuary. Marlene discussed her escape with none of her friends from high school days or the bottling plant. If one word got back to the sheriff he would

hospitalize her before he let her leave Wicket with his son.

She chose Monday for her departure because the sheriff and the fire chief always had a morning meeting with the mayor and the town treasurer followed by a liquid lunch at The Wicket Lady. While Junior played in the yard she packed his clothes and toys and her own clothes, making a point of leaving behind her wedding dress and two evening gowns Jack had bought her for Town Hall dinner-dances. She kept a few treasures from her parents' house and these she carefully encased in bubble-wrap. By ten a.m. she had loaded her car, an eight-year-old Ford station wagon, and was ready to go.

She phoned Dorinda, her closest friend, to say farewell and asked her to call the realtor on Tuesday and give him Ingrid's number for when the sale of their parents' house went through. Then she called Junior in from the yard.

'Where we going, Mommy?'

'To your Aunt Ingrid's.'

'Wow! In Californ-eye-ay?'

She nodded.

'Is Daddy coming too?'

'No, honey: just you and me.'

'Are we gonna say him goodbye?'

'He's in a meeting right now. We'll call him from Aunt Ingrid's.'

'Aunt Ingrid said she lives not far from Disneyland.'

'We can go there on the way – and Las Vegas, if you like.'

'If I like!'

She left her house and her hometown with no more backward glances than were necessary to check the mirror before turning or braking. The Black Hills had loomed over her life for twenty-two years; now they receded to a rear-view smudge. Her son went from excited to bored to fractious to asleep as they headed west on I-80 toward Rock Springs and the state line. She planned to overnight outside Salt Lake City.

It took another hard day's driving before Marlene, wearily checking herself and her fretful son into a motel at the tackier end of the Las Vegas Strip, felt safe enough to draw her first deep breath of the hot dry air of freedom.

All our lives have key moments, turning points. This was the first in the life of the future Jason Howl.

How would it turn out? Did Sheriff Jack drag them back after a high-speed pursuit for more – and more brutal – beatings? Did Marlene wind up in a tacky trailer park on the outskirts of San Diego en route to the *Jerry Springer Show*? Did her son become a foul-mouthed vicious thug?

Let's start with John/Jason since he is to be the hero of our story. He will not return to Wicket until the town makes him an 'Honored Son' many years hence. Nor does he become a thug, though he will play some on screen.

From his mother he inherited a plucky independence that would stand him in good stead when he ventured down the yellow-brick road to Hollywood. Growing up in an unsentimental age and an ungentlemanly society, he would get by without his grandpa's courtesy or his grandma's winsomeness. His other grandmother, killed in a car smash outside Wicket with her husband drunk at the wheel, was a church mouse who put nothing detectable into the gene pool. More importantly, John would never develop the aggressive streak that ran through at least three generations on his father's side. No wife of Jason Howl's would ever bear a bruise inflicted by him.

Sheriff Jack Howell did not send cars in pursuit of his fugitive wife. It was early evening on that Monday when he weaved his way home from The Wicket Lady. Even drunk he immediately noted the missing photographs and knick-knacks of his Boot Hill in-laws. He checked his son's stripped room and his wife's wardrobe, bare of all but her bridal gown and evening dresses. Then he sat

down and drank his way through a six-pack of Buds. During the night he tore the three gowns to shreds and trashed the furniture in Junior's room, unthinkingly conceding that they were gone for good.

'I never shoulda married that cunt,' he said. 'Schoolteacher's daughter, always thought she was too good for me.' (Actually, after the bottling-plant Marlene had imagined she was bettering herself by marrying the sheriff.)

His lawyer counseled against contesting the divorce, since there was medical as well as anecdotal evidence of maltreatment. The judge gave him limited supervised access rights which he never got round to avail himself of. A sheriff's life is a busy one, particularly when he drinks both on and off duty.

He remembered Junior's birthday for two years and sent checks care of Ingrid for three Christmases. The checks were acknowledged with notes in a childish scrawl, but the sheriff's birthday, along with Baby Jesus's, went unremembered by his son and ex-wife.

Over the next few years he proposed to two more factory-women, but his reputation as a wife-beater caused the proposals to be declined. Aside from the occasional adulteress (none of whom came Sheriff Howell's way) no wicked ladies patronized The Wicket Lady; the sheriff had to make a foray to Cheyenne or Billings and get himself laid by whores.

Long before his son achieved star status, John Howell III was sacked as sheriff. It was he who ended up living in a moldy trailer on a small pension and Welfare, one of Wicket's dozen or so town drunks.