

BILL GREEN

## THE HIGHWAYMAN

BUYING THE OLD HOUSE WAS JACK'S WAY OF MOONING old families that wouldn't talk to him and his mother, showing them he didn't care by not fixing it up. Sure, he put glass back in the windows and tacked on some roll roofing, but then he just let the paint peel in the middle of their highfalutin historic district like an old junk house, him camping out in the back room.

I imagine they weren't too pleased either seeing human scum like yours truly tool up on my hog wearing a Nazi helmet and a leather vest with tats hanging out. They might have wished I cut my goatee shorter and cussed quieter, but, hell, a man's got to moon the world in his own way. I was pushing forty-five back then—pushing it hard—and that's how come I understood Jack.

For all his mooning, Jack had roots in Columbus. His granddaddy was a bank president back when, and his mother still had money, but the family had slipped a lot. Jack made trips to Colombia on business, if you know what I mean, but he had to fly on a first-class ticket and stay in a hotel with a john in every room and whores that could talk English. That's how come he was always short of cash.

Of course looking slick can be useful, which is how come we were partners, but that doesn't mean I trusted the dirtbag. To begin with, he ripped me off. I didn't have to catch him—he ripped everybody off. Hell, he even bragged about it. It was practically his religion. I don't know how he lasted as long as he did—maybe because word was he could do worse if you crossed him—but he wasn't liable to turn on me. I wasn't greedy and took my share, as he comically called it, and it was enough for an old boy living on the back of a bike and no smack habit. He would have been crazy to cross his best patsy in any case, but he could get a little sketchy, which is how come I kept Baby—my nickel-plated Colt Python—under the pillow when I crashed at his house.

It was Daphne made me want to stay there.

First time I saw her I was making a pickup, and she had an easel up, painting the old barn out back—what Jack called his carriage house. She was in a little yellow top, her tan arms and legs all smooth and not a bruise on them. Something happens to women when they live hard, and none of it had happened to her. She also had hair longer than mine, and the way the sun hit it you could tell she used all that crap they advertise on TV. She was cream-rinsed and pH-balanced. She was perfect. Right off, I knew I had to get to know her.

Daphne went and got us a bucket of Kentucky Fried in her little red Mustang, and we ate it on the back porch. Jack used to go to fancy restaurants with old bags—women with money—and call it business, but Daphne and me didn't rate but Colonel Sanders. I wasn't complaining, though, as I copped the bottom step with a fine view of Daphne with her knees spread. There was something pure in the way she did it, like uncut Daphne out under that yellow bug light. I couldn't stop looking, and she knew it. She looked right back.

Of course I knew Jack was more her type with his oyster pants and peach Izods. He could have been old enough to be her daddy, but how could I compare with my greasy hair, dirty black Levis, and snake tattoo? I was scoping her out like some dirty old man, but she just smiled back at me like I was the pie-faced kid mama used to drop off at Sunday school. I couldn't get over it. Here I was mooning her like I moon the rest of the world, and what did she see but my pure soul?

Not that Daphne wasn't mooning a few citizens herself—maybe that's how come she understood me. She had it hung out the window too, dressing like jailbait and leaving her Mustang all night long in the driveway of a crook's house only three blocks from her daddy's. Everyone knew who she was mooning, but there wasn't a whole lot her daddy could do about it, as she was eighteen and out of school.

Her daddy had made a fortune in real estate, so he was a crook too, though not Jack's kind. I believe she found an honest crook to be refreshing, and I think she wanted the Izod dirtbag to teach her all the crooked and perverted licks her daddy had kept hidden from her. Jack was her bad guru, and she practised badness under him with a devotion that made it almost good. Anyway, if it was the only way Daphne could touch my world, I couldn't complain.

Jack put me up in the next room with a black-and-white TV and a mattress, and I heard it all through the door over the damn ballgame. She'd squeal and cuss; he'd growl and laugh. You get the picture. Then one night he knocked on the door.

"Hey, Snake, care to join the party?"

I had all my clothes on, laying there burnt out by what I heard and smoking a little weed. I couldn't believe it. I left Baby under the pillow and unlocked my side. If I was queer and Jack the only stud in Dixie, I swear to God I'd join a convent. He was all mealy mush around the waist and furry bird legs—what clothes hide and women don't seem to mind if there's cash on the dresser. I don't see how they can let those kinds of rough dudes crawl all over them and still stay sweet as children.

She was on a high bed in a dim room crammed up the walls with old furniture and paintings. She was naked too, but I don't have words good enough for how she looked, all tan and tough, those bikini straps white as milk. She was as honest as ever, as Daphne as ever, stoned out of her gourd but still her own pure self. Jack sat in a chair at the foot of the bed, a carved old throne-thing with lion's heads on its arms.

"Don't be shy, Snake. Climb up and help yourself."

The damn thing was I couldn't. I mean, I sat on the bed. I even touched her and saw my dirty fingernails against her perfect skin. I smelled perfume and woman sweat and wished I'd shaved. She was as perfect as a centrefold, and all I could do was look. Nobody moved for a while, and Jack might as well have been in Bogotá or on Uranus.

"Poor snake," she said, and started on my belt buckle.

Daphne undressed me like a baby. Then she made me lay down and did it all herself. It didn't take long. When she knew I was about to bust, she bent down and cradled my bald spot so I could take her into my mouth, and the end of it was the saddest and finest time I can remember. Finally, my old arms could move, and I hugged her on me for a long time. I wanted to die right there. How about that for an old boy who ought to know better?

So that was my only time with Daphne. I still didn't have the guts to come on to her, and I think Jack saw something happened then that he didn't plan and didn't like. I think he wanted me to trash Daphne, but I didn't, and me and the girl felt close after that, like she knew I'd always be on her side. Hell, I even slipped her a c-note when her old man cut off her allowance.

Jack took advantage of that to talk about robbing the old man. Of course, he'd take a cut. Daphne just had to get the alarm code. She said there was always a few grand in the office.

Then I discovered Baby missing from under my pillow. I thought she was my secret, which was stupid. I should have known Jack better than that.

"You'll get it back when I'm done," he told me.

"Can't score your own clean piece?"

Jack just grinned. "You'll get it back."

That night I got an earful, which made it hard to sleep. I always go back to how she served me like they wash feet in mama's church—a rare and precious thing. There's more to what you do than the doing. There's also the feeling, and I know Daphne felt something—not love, but maybe what the Bible calls charity. All Jack's Duracell orgasms couldn't buzz that away.

The next afternoon she was out on the sidewalk slowing down traffic as she started a picture of the house. I don't know how she looked so fresh after wearing out a set of alkalines, but there she was in white shorts and a red top with her gold tan and TV hair, painting in the dull parts of the picture. You could see what it was going to be. I stood a couple of minutes just looking, and there were a hundred things I wanted to say. Then she made it easy.

"What am I gonna do, Snake?"

"Rob your old man."

"I don't need to, you know. He said he'd send me to college in Nashville. He wants to get rid of me, but I don't care."

"You just want to be bad with Jack, girl."

She didn't answer.

"You might be in over your head."

She didn't like that.

"Do I look stupid? I know how rotten Jack is. You're rotten too."

"Sure, I'm scum of the earth. Did I ever deny it? That's the damn difference."

"I'm rotten too."

"You want to be, don't you? But you wouldn't have to work so hard at it if you was. But you keep rolling in it, and one day you won't be able to wash it off. Trust me, Daphne. You don't want to be rotten or dead or anything else that's liable to happen with Jack. He's dangerous."

She put down her brush.

“Don’t you trust him either, Snake. He talks about you too. He didn’t like . . . what we did. I don’t know what he expected.”

“I do.”

She took a breath so loud I could hear it over the traffic. Then she started painting again. The light caught her long brown hair—long enough to twist into rope—and I felt cold out in the sun. I looked at her perfect neck.

“Just make sure nobody’s in the office when he breaks in. He might kill somebody just to prove he’s got a pair.”

She wiped a wide brush on the paint board she was holding and coloured in the roof of the house dark green. “Don’t worry,” she said. “I’m not as stupid as you think.”

I started thinking about leaving town, but I stayed close.

That night they got stoned, went out, and came back falling all over each other in the hall, squealing and laughing, but I kept watching TV. Then halfway through the late movie, KA-BOOM. It was my Baby crying. I was half-asleep, half-fried, and all-stupid. Why else would I kick the door and walk in on a .357?

Jack was posed up on the bed, pig-naked except for a cowboy hat, bouncing bowlegged like Wyatt Earp with Baby in his hand and a bullet hole through the wall. Daphne was curled up in bed, thank God, laughing on whatever Jack had fed her. You could smell the brain cells frying.

“Give me the damn gun!” I yelled. “You think the neighbours won’t call it in? You done some dumb things, Jack, but this here takes the cake!”

Jack just grinned and pushed back his hat with the muzzle. He swung off the bed like Marlon Brando in *One-Eyed Jacks* getting ready to roll and plug Karl Malden, but he didn’t roll. He couldn’t even stand.

“Hell, Snake, you worry too damn much—like an old lady. These big houses eat noise.”

He made it easy, hunched in a macho pose with his eyes rolled up to the ceiling. I straight-armed his gun wrist, buried a right in his sweet spot, raised a knee while he was folding down, and twisted Baby out of his hand. Jack wobbled up, and I punched him two more times until he stayed down, knotted up and bleeding. It felt good, hurting the flab that had just been on Daphne. Then she flew out of bed like a porno nurse, and I couldn’t look.

“Put something on,” I said as I tossed her one of Jack’s fifty-dollar shirts. She slipped it on and hooked two buttons before getting back to her Florence Nightingale act. Hell, all he did was bite his lip and maybe bruise a

couple of herpes.

I sat up in the throne chair—the one Jack watched Daphne and me from—and curled my fingers into the lion mouths, rubbing their wooden fangs until Jack came around. She wiped her face with the shirttail, helped him into bed, and cradled his head in her lap, looking like she wanted to cry. Me, I didn't care. Snake was in charge for a change. Jack was probably right about the gunshot. I wouldn't have stayed if I expected heat.

"Hell, Snake," Jack said. "I'd have given you the damn gun."

"I know you would, buddy, but you know how impatient little old ladies can get. You robbed the bastard, didn't you? You took the damn money."

Jack nodded, and I could see he was fading in and out of consciousness.

"Where'd you put it?"

Daphne blinked down at him.

"Yeah, Jack. Where is it?"

Jack's face creased. You've heard of laugh lines. Well, these were fear lines, suspicion lines—little canyons all around his middle-age eyes.

"Stashed," he mumbled. "Don't worry, babe." Then he passed out. He could've won the Academy Award for best portrayal of a sleeping baby, sweet as a cow pie.

I wish I could say Daphne looked sweet, but there were bruises around her eyes and her makeup was smeared. Mostly she looked bruised around the heart. I stayed on the throne, Baby hurting the small of my back, while she pulled up the sheet, covering her little ankles.

"You don't know where it is, do you?"

She shook her head.

"You're stupid sometimes, you know that? You'll never see a nickel of it now."

Her pale eyes floated when I said that, looking down at Jack in her lap, her eyelids lowered like blue curtains. Then something turned over inside her, and she looked back up with water in her eyes. Jack started snoring, his jaw slack like an old man, and she pushed him off and slipped down beside him on a pillow.

"I'll be in the next room," I said as I got up to leave, although Daphne didn't seem to notice. I figured they must've taken Quaaludes. Jack could've opened a drug store out of that bedside drawer of his.

I had business the next morning, and when I got back she was out on

the front sidewalk working on the same picture. This time she squeezed out a gob of white and smeared it all over the roof of the house, which was pretty near done, the windows lined in and all. She smeared white paint on the porch roof too and then started on the barn.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Snow.”

“It don’t hardly ever snow here.” There was snow around Jack’s house, but it wasn’t on the roof—it was in ziplock bags.

“I’m an artist, Snake. I don’t stop at what I see.”

It didn’t take her long to use up all the white paint, and all that was left was the sky and the house, which looked like a shadow with black windows. Daphne was good—a real artist—even when she was working fast with a fat brush.

“This place is bad for you, Daphne.”

“You mean Jack?” She squinted at me. Then she looked away, fussing with her hands to put up the paints. “I don’t know who he thinks he’s screwing with, Snake. Winter has come.”

She shut the paint box and snatched up the picture, the white paint starting to run. I got the easel, but she grabbed it from me. She could tote for herself, little Daphne.

“You better split too,” she said.

Daphne levelled her big eyes at me, arms full, and puckered blowing a no-handed kiss. Then she was off to the front door, and I followed at a respectful distance like an Arab wife. It was the damndest thing.

Jack opened the screen for her (I guess he’d been watching us), and she walked by like he was a garbage can. When I tried the same trick, he grabbed my shirt. I pulled back, ready for a rematch, but he backed up, palms out. Something chemical was still in his brain—that or he’d gone some new kind of crazy.

“Chill, Snake. It’s cool, man. Hell, I was way out of line.” He had his hand on my shoulder, and it didn’t feel good. “Man, I bet you thought I’d boldly gone where no Jack’s gone before, but you got your piece back, okay? You know I wouldn’t rob you, brother.”

This time I put my hand on his shoulder. “Sure, Jack. It’s okay.”

Maybe my mama raised some hell, but she never raised no fool, so I was on my bike and out of there. I found an old girlfriend to crash with—a divorcee named Margie with two big sons who stayed out most of the time

and were used to their mama's ways. I also called a buddy on the police force, and he said I was clean. Sure, they knew all about Jack—the cops ain't fools—but they weren't making a case right now. I told him to call me at Margie's if something went down, and he called about a week later. "It's to-night," he said and read Jack's address off something. "Drug charges, maybe burglary. Your name's come up as a known associate, so they'll try to pick you up too. There's also a female informant, but I doubt you'll see her again unless you make the trial." I told him I'd thank him the usual way.

Then I packed my gear, got on my hog, and went straight to Jack's house. I went for one sane reason and one crazy one. The sane one was my buddy told me it wasn't staked out, so I could clear out all my stuff and not be residing there. The crazy one was that I still gave a damn about Jack and wanted to warn him, if it wasn't too late.

There was no answer when I knocked on the door. He usually kept it double locked, but the screen wasn't even hooked, so I stuck my head in and yelled. I heard a grunt from his room, and I found him lying flat on the bed, staring like he was in love with some bug on the ceiling. He was still in his rich-boy clothes—the oyster-coloured pants, the fruit-coloured shirt with the lizard on the pocket, and the black knee socks—looking and smelling like he'd slept a week in them. The shirt was hiked over his belly like a half-roasted marshmallow with a mohawk, and his chin was covered in grey stubble. I've seen boys on missions out to the Klingon quadrant, and it looked like he was still on warp drive.

"Jack," I put my hand on him. "Look at me, man. How about a drink of water?" That's what they usually forget to do.

He worked his head around and stared like I was in a galaxy far, far away. Then he sat up, which surprised me. Careful, like petting a stray, I pushed the hair out of his eyes and filled a glass in the john. He drank and stared around like he was checking for ghosts.

"She was ratting us out, Snake—getting us hung," he said. "I didn't have a choice but to kill her."

If Jack killed anybody, I knew from my buddy that it wasn't Daphne. Maybe he tried to kill her, but she'd be tough to strangle in or out of the sack. So I humoured the son of a bitch.

"But then I saw her coming down that stream of light, coming back." He pulled up on my shoulder, blowing four-day breath. "I killed her once, Snake. I can't keep killing her every day. What the hell does she want?"

I didn't flush his stash. Possession with intent to sell ought to make a simple case without the cops hassling him. Maybe that's what happened. I don't know. Me, I split for Florida.