



**HARRY
CREWS**

AN AMERICAN FAMILY

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The Baby with the Curious Markings

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2006



FOR GEORGE KINGSON

*Your exquisite cradle of body,
mind and spirit has rocked me
to a place where only the angels know.
You gave me back my life.
Lovely lady, my heart will forever
beat with your heart.*

Chapter One

It was Sunday, Major Melton's second wedding anniversary. As soon as he opened his eyes he heard the demented barking of the pit bulldog. Then all the way from the other room he smelled the baby. The baby boy with the strange markings. The dog's barking got louder. Curled beside him under the thin blanket, his wife farted briefly as she snored counterpoint to the sound of the dog. He knew the dog was probably as crazy as it was ever going to get by now. Poor bastard. Major was sympathetic. The dog had gone berserk from being tied on a leash that was too short. Major's own problem exactly which hardly made him or the dog unique. Everybody he knew was going quietly mad from being tied on a leash that was too short.

My God, he thought, hardly awake and it already felt like a bad day. Another bad day in a whole calendar of bad days. His dog was out there tied to the only tree left in the whole neighborhood. The place used to be a forest here until a developer decided this would be a great place to build something called Crippled Horse Acres. So the first thing the developer did was bring in an army of bulldozers, push down every living thing, and burn it up.

A single tree had been spared. Nobody knew why. Major was fairly sure he had paid an extra ten thousand dollars for his house because he got the tree. His wife had fallen in love with it.

"I've fallen in love with that tree," she said one early Spring evening when they drove by the vacant lot where the house would later be built. For the moment the lot held nothing but a single spindly tree.

He only looked at her, unable to think of anything to say after her naked declaration of love for the tree.

"Don't let anything happen to it," she said, "or you know what."

He did know what — the bitch would cut him cold between the sheets — so he said, "I'll make sure the tree's well taken care of." But he tried not to think about it too much because God knows he had too much to think about already.

Nicky rolled out of bed and padded to the bathroom.

Even after two years of marriage, the sight of her naked made his stomach pitch and roll. She was thin as a model and lightly muscled from hours of swimming laps in the pool at the junior college where he taught English. By any measure, she was an incredibly beautiful girl with a stunning body. He had thought more than once that the way she looked might very well be the root of all his problems. He had gone about marriage the way he was convinced most guys went about it. He had married for reasons of the flesh. When it came time for him to think about getting married, he became determined not to spend the rest of his life looking across the bed or across the breakfast table at a homely girl. As puberty approached he had started thinking it must be as easy to fall in love with a good-looking girl as it was one that was plain. He had finished a hitch in the Marine Corps before he decided that the girl he married might as well be wealthy as well as good-looking. It had not been easy but he had managed to pull it off and he had never been sorry. Her money was, after all, how he had managed a two hundred thousand dollar house on a junior college teacher's salary. Well, not her money really, her parent's. But it might as well as have been hers because they loved their daughter and wanted her to have the very best of everything. Which made them generous to a fault. They were

both dentists with great smiles and consummated dental technique. God bless their money and the teeth.

She came back to bed and was getting under the covers when the baby made a sound as if somebody had stepped on him. For a moment Major Melton lay very still wondering if he could get away without reminding her that they were expecting a visitor this afternoon. He clearly could not. It was pay now or pay later. Later would be worse.

He tried anyway. "We've got to get up unless you want me to get on the horn and call Peter. Tell him I'm sick or something. I can call it off if you like. He won't be all that freaked about not watching the Super Bowl with us."

She was suddenly off the bed, standing tall, bright as a nickel. "How could you even think such a thing?" she said. "He'd be crushed." She turned her head to glance at the clock. "You get the baby. I'll make coffee. Get shaking now. Petey is never late."

Ah, Petey. Never Peter or Pete. In her mouth, he was always Petey, like she was his fucking mother or something.

Yeah, or something, like maybe his whore. He snatched his Levis from the back of a chair and hopped down the hallway on one leg, trying to pull the Levis on as he went. He hopped into his son's room and stopped beside the crib. Major leaned into the crib until he was close over his son.

"Damn, you stink, little boy," he said.

The baby said something back to him, something wet and smelling of milk. Then the baby reached up with his tiny, dimpled hands and started a careful examination of his feet.

God, he was a beautiful baby. But beautiful or not, Major had a terrible problem with the way his son looked. There was too much of Peter about him. For one thing, he had a deep cleft in his chin. The cleft was so deep you could hide a quarter in it. Major had never tried to hide one in it, of course, but he thought you probably could hide a goddamn quarter in it. And his friend Peter — the very guy who had introduced him to his wife — had such a cleft.

Major had never seen a cleft before he met Peter. Now his fucking infant son had one. Was there a coincidence in the whole world large enough to accommodate that sorry fact? He hoped so, he desperately hoped so, but finally he doubted it. And if it was not a coincidence, then all he was left with were his gross, night-time visions of Pete mounting his wife.

As he watched, the baby struggled to put his toes in his mouth. Major would rather take a beating than open his son's overfull diaper, but he did not have to like it, he only had to do it, so he held his breath and bent to the task.

"One of the pleasures of parenthood," he said grimly to himself. And then to his son: "You ought to be ashamed, befouling yourself like this and you already nearly six months old."

He pulled open the Velcro fasteners of the diaper. The mound that confronted him was yellow and of an odor indescribable, but he was not really looking at the place where his son had found relief. Not any more. Now that the diaper was open, his attention was focused on his son's cock, standing at half-mast and about as big as a peanut. However, it was not the half erection that caused him to stare in what he thought was probably an unseemly way. Rather, it was the markings, the strange markings on the tiny cock. On one side, from root to circumcised tip was the purple figure of a camel. At least it looked like a camel most of the time. Other times it looked like a lion standing on its back legs. The image varied but not the startling color. It was always bright purple. The royal color.

The doctor at the birthing, and the pediatricians later, all agreed it was a birthmark. Perhaps unfortunately located, but a birthmark all the same, and therefore nothing to worry about. But it worried him none-the-less. He did not know the world of birthmarks very well, except he was fair

certain that a baby had to get a birthmark from either its mother or its father. And so far as he had been able to discover, neither he nor his wife had a birthmark, whether purple or any other color. And God knows he had looked. First on himself and then on Nicky. She had not taken the examination as well as that well.

“You son-of-a-bitch,” she had said in a voice that was a fierce little whisper. “This is grounds for divorce. What time is it anyway?”

“It’s still early,” he said. “Now if you could turn over and lift your ass a bit, perhaps ...”

“You’ve looked there,” she hissed through clenched teeth. “Turn out the light, damn it.”

“It’s not that I haven’t looked there,” he said, “only maybe I haven’t looked, you know, well enough and ...”

“I’ll slap you blind, if you don’t turn out the light and go to sleep.”

Her way of talking had turned violent over the past eighteen months or so. He did not like it. He had even found it, at times, frightening. He quickly turned off the light and laid breathing quietly into the dark of the bedroom.

Still, over time, he had been able to search every square inch of her several times, even if it did only keep her in a state of mild outrage. In fact, it had occurred to him that her anger was all out of proportion to the small cooperation he had asked of her, which only made his suspicions stronger that the baby had not got his strange markings from Nicky or from him. That, to his mind, left only Peter. Did Peter have the same purple markings on his dick? How could Major find out for sure one way or the other? It was a question that had rarely been out of his mind since he had first seen his son’s ugly little cock.

“You don’t mean to make an all day project out of changing that baby’s diaper, do you?”

He looked up to see his wife standing in the doorway, her hip cocked in a sarcastic question mark.

“I won’t be but another minute, Honey.”

“I’ll finish with the baby,” she said. “You go and talk to Petey.”

“I didn’t hear him come in.”

“He’s in the back yard. He’s gone out to see how the dog’s doing.”

“Maybe I can get him to take it home with him.”

“Don’t you dare say a word to Petey. Not one word. He’s a friend and that dog was a gift. I’ll bet he’s never given one of the pits to anybody else before.”

“The beast wasn’t even his to give, belonged to his daddy.”

“Well, hell, I knew that.”

“Damn, I can’t win for losing. First I couldn’t refuse the dog because it was a gift, now I can’t give it back for the same reason.”

“You and I know that’s not the way it happened. But go ahead and blame the whole thing on me.”

“I’m not blaming you for anything. Should I? Is there something to blame you for?”

“What’s wrong with you? What are you talking about?”

“You’re the one who brought it up.”

“What? Brought what up?”

“Blame.”

“Have you been drinking too?”

“Too? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Petey’s been in the bottle already this morning. I can tell. And you’re beginning to sound

little drunk, too.”

—“I’m not. But I’m beginning to wish I was.” He turned and started down the hall.

He had his hand on the back door when she said, “Take him a beer.”

“What?”

“He wants a beer.”

“Is that what he said?”

“I said you’d bring him one. And don’t sound so self-righteous. It is Super Bowl Sunday, you know.”

“Good Christ, Nicky.”

“You begrudge poor Petey a beer?”

Poor fucking Petey and poor fucking tree with fucking dog tied to it and poor fucking baby with poor fucking markings on his tiny dick and all of it on the poor fucking scam that is Super fucking Bowl Sunday. How utterly depressing. He felt his whole life quietly unraveling. But he was determined to hold what he could together so he winked at his wife, and said, “Right it is, my dear. One beer coming up for Petey.”

Nicky said, “Well thank God. That sounds more like it.”

Major went to the refrigerator and took out two bottles of beer and walked into the backyard.

The sun was almost directly overhead in a sky that was blue and cloudless. The pit bull lay on its hard, flat stomach with its head — only slightly bigger than a man’s fist — resting on the ground between its forelegs.

“Your dog is shithouse crazy,” Pete said, taking the beer that was offered him.

“He’s not my dog.”

“Who owns the only tree in sight?”

“Leave the tree out of it.”

“Can’t be done. Not in a million. There’s only one tree as far as the eye can see. You own it, it would seem. Therefore, whatever’s tied to the tree belongs to you.”

“Your logic is as crooked as you are. How much you had to drink this morning?”

“Well, hell, it is Super Bowl Sunday.”

“The Super Bowl doesn’t even make the day special. When’s the last time you saw a good game in the Super Bowl?”

“My point exactly,” Pete said. “The tree now, that’s different. And then the dog. Then you.”

“Go back in the kitchen and look in the bottom of the fridge. Get yourself another beer and press it to your face. You’ll feel better. Get me one while you’re at it. I’m going to give the dog some fresh water if I can get close enough to him without him tearing my arm off.”

“Pits don’t need water, they need blood.”

Major threw back his head and stared into the cloudless sky before making a sound that was half-sigh, half-groan. “Every time I think I’ve seen the worst from you, there’s always something nastier on the other side.”

“Hell, that’s not nasty. You want nasty? I can show you nasty.”

“Just don’t make up something that’ll take me for a fool.”

“I’m not making anything up here, only describing what I see. Get used to it.”

“I don’t like it. Quit with the description.”

“Can’t do that, Bro.”

“I’m not your brother.”

“Of course we’re brothers. We’ve always been brothers. Some day you’ll know that. I love you

man.”

—“Don’t love me.”

“Since I’m trying to get you to see how things are, I want you to think about birds of prey.” Pete quickly held up his hand, palm out. “Wait. Let me finish. Birds of prey — hawks and eagles and such — won’t drink water unless they’re sick. If they’re really healthy and down with the world, all they want, all they’ll drink is blood.”

“Is that really true?”

“Sure it’s true.”

“Who told you that?”

Pete smiled. “Dad told me.”

“I guess I walked right into that one.”

“I guess you did,” Pete said.

Major dropped his head back and screamed into the unmarked sky. “NNICKYY!”

“No use getting your wife into this. And remember, it is Sunday. Not everybody gets up for the Super Bowl. You’ll have every late sleeper on the block out here mad enough to crucify us.”

“I feel like I’ve already been crucified,” said Major. The back door slammed open and there stood Nicky, bright as light, in shorts that were too tight and too short, making Major momentarily forget the problem with the dog and remember only the problem with his strangely marked son.

“Petey, for Christ’s sweet sake,” said Nicky in a voice pitched strangely low and lilting, “Can you do anything about him? He’s been crazy all morning.”

Pete had gone over to sit on the step next to where she was standing. Major could hear the flirtatiousness in her voice. In a single dreadful instant he realized that she had no fucking shame, this woman, and he realized too that he did not know her.

“I was thinking about taking him and his poor animal over to Dad’s store before the game. I really don’t know if even Dad can bring him back or not. Nicky, he’s got this dog as dry as burnt toast. I’ve been trying to tell him that without help it’ll be dead before dark.”

Major turned slowly to face Pete. “Why are you lying? Burnt toast, Pete? Burnt fucking toast? Dead before dark, Pete? You were telling me no such thing. Why are you lying like this? What have you ever done to you?”

Chapter Two

In the living room in front of the television set, the baby was slapping the pit bull across the head with a soiled diaper. The dog was wearing a muzzle made of black wire. Above the muzzle his eyes were malevolent and shot with blood. The eyes never seemed to blink and lay in the bony little skull staring with such intensity they seemed crossed. The baby swung the diaper and slapped the dog again, then raised the diaper to his mouth and chewed on it.

“Nicky, please do something about this baby, would you?”

“Just listen to yourself, Major. Petey, will you listen to him?”

“I ain’t got time for this. I ought to get the dog on over to the Pit Stop and let Daddy have a look at ’m before it’s too late.”

“Said he was dying is all you said.”

“Believe I said you was killing ’m. It’s a difference.”

Sitting in a low chair, Pete did not look up from his long yellow feet that he was working on scaling dead skin way from his discolored toes with a tiny knife. The way he was concentrating on the particles of skin sifting toward the floor made Major’s gorge rise. And he wondered vaguely if he could kill Pete. It seemed a right and natural thought and it did not surprise him at all. It never did.

“Not to the dog, I wouldn’t imagine.”

“What?”

“Make a difference.”

Nicky stood straight out of her chair and in a tight little voice said: “Jesus fucking Christ. I need to find a shot of whiskey.”

When she was gone, Major said: “I wonder what the hell’s eating her?”

“The curse, old son, the curse. Women get it and we pay for it.”

Major felt something cold and smooth move over his spine. Now how did this son-of-a-bitch know his wife was on the rag?

Pete was staring at him. “You all right, man?”

“Why, shouldn’t I be?”

“Damned if I know. But you look like shit.”

They held each other in a long steady gaze. Major saw something, or thought he did, something he could not name, a kind of flinch in the other’s eyes. Did Pete suddenly realize what he had said about Nicky? In that moment, Major could almost admire him, this man, caught, nailed to the wall and yet he showed nothing, not even a twitch.

When he spoke, his voice was even, betraying nothing. “I better go, man, get this dog where he needs to be.”

“Yeah, I guess you better.”

“I’ll say hello to dad for you.”

Major did not answer, only watched silently as Pete left, carrying the pit bull under his arm. Then he stood a moment listening, before he called, “Nicky.” For answer there was only silence in the house. He called again, this time louder, and again got no response. What a singularly fucked up day, how completely strange.

At the end of the hall, he opened the door to the master bedroom. She was sitting on a little bench in front of her makeup mirror. A half-empty bottle of whiskey sat in front of her. Scotch, for Christ's sake. He had never ordered scotch for her, had never seen her drink it.

"What the hell are you doing?" he asked, in a voice too loud, too angry.

She said softly, "Trying to smooth it out a little."

"You're not making any sense," he said. "Smooth out what?"

"My life," she said.

"You're drunk, and I think ..."

She held up a hand to stop him. "I don't want to know what you think. And I don't want to talk things out, as you would say. Here, let me make it simple for you, for both of us. You give me the baby and the house and I'll not ask for alimony or child support. I won't even ask them to put you in jail."

"Christ, you are drunk. And while we're at it, when did we start keeping whiskey in the house?"

She stood up suddenly and whirled, eyes blazing, "Goddammit, I said I didn't want to talk about this. You talk it to death if you want to. But talk to yourself. I won't be listening." Slowly she sat down again and poured the glass in front of her half full.

"There," she said in a little explosion of breath after she had drunk the whiskey off. "That'll get me closer to where I need to be."

"It'll get you shit faced is what it'll do. But you can rest easy, I won't run out on you the way some guys would. Whatever's wrong with you, we'll ride it out together."

She watched him in the mirror and slowly shook her head. "You poor, dimwitted, motherfucker."

"When did your mouth get so filthy?"

"Nothing's changed. The way it is now is the way it's always been."

"I never noticed," he said.

"I suspect there's a lot of things I do that you never noticed."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm sorry. Did I slip into Arabic again? I thought I said what I said in solid straight-forward English."

"Wise-ass."

"Leave my ass out of this. You've got no rights here, none at all."

"And when did this happen?"

He breathed deeply and then exhaled slowly. He forced his shoulders to relax. "This has got out of hand. What you need is a good long swim at the college, maybe sober you up some, too."

"I haven't been in that pool since the baby was born."

"What the hell have you been doing?"

"Something else."

"Being mysterious, are we? Let me tell you what I think. I think confession is good for the soul. And that's what you're going to do right now. Talk to me."

"I told you we weren't talking, you and I. But you keep fucking with me and you will find out. Probably more than you want to know."

"Why you presumptuous little ... little ..."

"Don't call me a bitch."

"... bitch," he said.

Without quite realizing it, he had moved closer to where she sat on the little bench in front of

the makeup mirror. He was close enough to slap her and found himself thinking how good it would feel to do it. Then as he watched a smile, thin as the cut of a knife, took her mouth, and her face tightened, hardened into something that made him think of rigor mortis.

When she spoke her voice was flat and quiet. "Do you remember the little episode in the kitchen when I was five months pregnant?"

"Don't," he said.

"Oh, but I must," she said. "Do you remember what made you angry that day? Don't strain yourself. I don't remember either. But why should we? There are so many episodes to keep track of. But I think that was the hardest you ever hit me. And I dropped like a sack of wet shit, or at least that's what you said. Your son and I, we dropped like a sack of wet shit."

"Goddamit, Nicky."

He felt the muscles across his back tighten and his right hand close into a fist. In a blurred sequence that he would remember none of later, he was on his back, a bell tower slamming in his head, his mouth open, trying to speak before a thick column of blood rising like a fountain out of his throat and falling hot over his chin and chest. His nose felt broken.

From far away he heard a sweet, singing voice tell him that he had dropped like a sack of wet shit. The rankest kind of bitter fear drove Major into a sitting position. When he finally had his voice again, he said, "My God, Nicky, you could have killed me."

In the same lovely voice from a great distance, she said, "Still might."

"You ... you wouldn't."

"You're right, I wouldn't. Jail time's not for me. Besides, there's people enough to do you if I want you done."

He groaned. "Fucking Pete."

"No, no. Pete's for loving. To take care of you, I was actually thinking of the ugliest little Jap God ever made. He's the guy I found when I went looking the day your son and I dropped like a sack of wet shit. Much later, when I told the Jap of things you had actually done to me or made me do to you, he wanted to break your fingers. Among other things. But I didn't think that breaking you up was the right thing to do just then. So it had to wait. I had to wait. And waiting to fuck you up damn near killed me. God, I've waited a long time to see your blood run."

He heard her quick explosive breath and then: "Hold on, Sweetheart, here it comes again."

He tried to roll away from her in time, but could not. She rose in the air, seemed to hang suspended there a long drawn moment, before kicking him over either kidney, her feet naked of shoes and unforgiving as stone.

The pain was exquisite but when he screamed, he couldn't even hear the sound of his own voice. Then he must have passed out. When he swam to consciousness, she seemed to be beating him with a whip of some sort. He told her, or thought he told her over and over again, that her mother and father would see her in hell for what she was doing to him.

Finally, she said, "Oh, if you want to see mom and dad? We can work that." But she kept on beating him. "The Jap," she said, "was a cowboy as a young man." Then as if she could read his mind she said, "This is his whip. He gave it to me to beat you with. It seems to work just fine." Then she hit him again.

When next he knew anything, a man who smelled of cigar smoke and sweat was folding him into the back seat of a taxi. Finally, she seemed to be handing the cab driver a bit of paper.

"Here's where you're taking him. And this is your fare. Now get this piece of wet shit out of here."

In the cab, the hack drove like a madman. After a bit, he slowed down and asked: “What the fuck’s that lady got against you, pal?”

Chapter Three

Major Melton felt her soft wide mother's hands on his face, his neck. God, it felt good the way she touched him. And right behind her touch came the old man's hands, heavier, thicker, but comforting all the same.

Then he felt his throat suddenly squeezed, his breathing constricted, and behind that his e being twisted. Now, what could the old bitch be doing to his fucking ear? "Elton, he's turning blue."

"Of course he's turning blue. I want him blue. Didn't, I wouldn't have him by the throat."

Finally the hand came off his throat. He struggled to breathe and then to speak. "Doctor ... I. you. What are you doing, Doctor?"

"Don't call me a doctor. I'm a goddamn dentist."

"Yes, sir. Well. Of course, a dentist..."

The old lady, her eyes full of tears and rage, bent over Major. "How long did you think it'd b before we'd find out what was going on over there, you bastard?"

"I... can explain ..."

"I'll pull your fucking tongue out!"

"Myrtle, don't let him drag us down to his level."

"We shot right past his level some time back. And you know what? I don't even care. I don know who's going to kill him, but I want to be there when it happens."

Major felt as if little nails of ice had been driven into his spine. In spite of himself he starte making little whimpering sounds in his throat.

"Oh, stop that, Major," Elton said as he slapped him.

"God," Myrtle said. "Is that...?"

"Indeed it is," said Elton. "The young beast has shit himself."

Major Melton felt a wide warm spot of shit spreading under the cheeks of his ass. He w humiliated and embarrassed beyond saying.

"I'm sorry," Major said.

"Did you ... ? Well, did you?" Myrtle growled, stood up and shook herself like a dog coming o of water.

"Yes, I heard him. It's just the kind of over the top thing I was waiting for. Get my bag."

The old woman looked at her husband, and then looked longer still before she said: "I don know, Elton."

"Don't you remember her coming over here with those eyes, giving us the oldest batter woman line in the world? Yeah, the door she ran into was spelled f ... i... s ... t."

"And you believed her, didn't you?"

"Of course, I believed her, she's my daughter. And that's why I'm going to get my bag," he said "You put a knee in his gut while I'm gone."

Elton got up and went briefly into the kitchen. He came out and said: "Here's the cleaver. If h moves, put it into his skull."

"You couldn't kill me, Myrtle," Major Melton said after Elton had gone.

"I really don't know. Why don't you try me?"

Major Melton closed his eyes and tried to get his breath and at the same time, tried to think something he could say that might convince her to get off him. But finally he could do neither.

Elton came back with a black bag, set it on the floor, and opened it. He reached in and when his hand came out again, Major Melton felt his asshole wink and spit, followed by the high singing noise of what seemed like an endless fart. Elton and his old wife swung to focus on Major like dogs on a point.

“You filthy young animal,” Elton said.

Major had not taken his eyes off the dentist’s hand. “My God, is that ... is ... Those are fucking pliers.”

The dentist looked at the tool in his hand. “This is a Deep Mouth Extractor.”

“To hell you say. Those are wire pliers. Look at that. You’ve even got the handles taped.”

“Now that part is true. You think sweat is slick, try holding on to something covered in blood.”

“Damn!” Major cried. “You don’t know ... AAGGHHH!”

Right in the middle of Major speaking, Elton had gone right between Major’s lips with his Deep Mouth Extractor and came out with a molar that shined with blood when he held it aloft.

It was all the two of them could do to hold Major down. He bucked and rolled and pitched the floor on the floor and screamed not so much in pain as terror. For the first time he was convinced they were going to kill him.

And while they held him down, Myrtle talked on in a little monotone as if giving a kind of lecture. “What skill. It takes extraordinary power of finger and wrist to deliver a tooth under the circumstances. Elton, there’s not another dentist in a thousand mile radius of where we sit who could have gone in the way you did and use the Deep Mouth Extractor with such exquisite success.”

“I know,” said Elton.

“What the hell are you people doing?”

They all turned toward the sound of the voice, Major doing the best he could to see too but not quite making it.

“Whoever’s there, for God’s sake, save me,” Major begged. Blood bubbled around his words as he spoke.

Elton looked up at Pete and winked. “He’s just upset because we’re pulling his teeth a little.”

“You’re what?” demanded Pete. He walked around Myrtle who was still sitting on the floor and into Major’s field of vision.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Major said.

“I thought you would want me to help you, bro.” He smiled and kicked Major gently on the bottom of the shoe. “I bet you don’t mind us being brothers now.”

“Get me away from these freaks. They’ve lost their minds. I’m serious, these bastards are killers.”

“I don’t know as I would talk like that about people who were snatching perfectly good teeth out of my head.”

“It’s only payback,” said Elton. “A little payback.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Major said.

“Yes, you do,” Pete said. “People are lined up to tear off a piece of your ass. Get used to it.”

“Where’s Nicky?” Major asked.

“Leave it alone. Don’t go there.”

“Kiss my ass. Where is she?”

“Where you can’t find her.” Pete dropped onto his haunches and gently touched Major’s blood.

slick lip with the point of his finger. "By God, they've hurt you bad, old son." He looked up and away from them and said as gentle as a prayer: "Is there a sin big enough in the world for this kind of punishment?"

Chapter Four

The phone rang and Elton said: "Can you get that, Pete?"

"Sure."

Pete answered the phone and then said nothing, only listened for what seemed to be a very long time. Finally Pete said into the phone: "You sure this is what you want to do?" Silence again for a long moment and then, "OK, OK. Just asking. I'll get it done." He put the phone back in the cradle and stood looking at Major.

"What?" Major asked.

"Nicky. She wants me to bring you to the house."

"You'll do no such thing," Elton said.

"If you could have heard her, I think you would agree with me that we ought to follow her instructions. Precisely."

"And what were they, her instructions? Precisely."

"Elton, please."

"I agree with your wife," Pete said. "The attitude won't help a thing. I only answered the phone."

"No reason to kill the messenger," Myrtle said. Major, who was sitting up now, turned to look at her blankly, his eyes more than a little glazed from the beating. "No reason to kill what?"

"Shut up, idiot," Elton said. Then to Pete: "Forgive the sarcasm. What did my daughter say exactly?"

"Throw him in the trunk of the car and take him to her."

"To hell you say!" cried Major.

"Do it," the old man said.

"Come on," Pete said, pulling Major to his feet. "Let's make this easy."

Major leaned against Pete and Pete let him do it, partially supporting him with an arm at his back.

"The world has gone crazy," said Major in a little more than a whisper.

"And it's not over yet," Pete said.

The two of them walked out to the car where Pete opened the trunk and Major did not so much get into it as he fell into it. Behind them, the old man and woman, blood splattered and holding hands, watched them from the open doorway.

Pete laid a hundred yards of rubber when he took off and over the squealing tires he could hear Major screaming from the trunk: "Go slow! You bastard! Go slow!"

Pete ignored him as he raced across town. Major tried to guess where they were on the trip to his house, but being slammed about in the tire smelling darkness of the trunk, he knew guessing was useless. He curled tightly into a fetal position and tried to protect his bruised and battered body as much as he could. Then, just as he was getting settled for the ride, the car slid to a stop. He knew something was wrong. They could not have possibly arrived at his house so quickly. And if they were not at his house, where the hell were they? The trunk popped open and he was blinded by the light. Pete's face gradually swam into focus above him.

"All right, scumbag, come up out of there."

“Jesus, Pete, have you lost your mind, too?”

—“If I had lost my mind, mother fucker, that would be the least of your worries. Now get up out there!”

“I can’t get out, not by myself.”

“Oh, I think you can.”

Pete reached in and buried both his hands in Major’s hair. He pulled and lifted.

Major grunted, made a muffled scream, and with his legs pushed himself over the bottom lip of the trunk. Pete never took his hands out of Major’s hair until Major was flat on the asphalt, sobbing.

“Pete, for God’s sake ...”

Whatever Major was about to say died in his throat because as he turned his head to look at Pete he saw what looked like every pit bull dog in the world, all of them on leashes, being walked by old men and women. Major had never before seen what he was looking at now, but he knew what it was. Hell, everybody in town, in the state for that matter, knew about these dogs. It was Pete’s father’s place of business, THE PIT STOP, a pet store that sold only pit bull dogs. Pete’s father was a very famous crazy person who was trying single-handedly to rehabilitate the reputation and image of the notoriously ferocious little terrier best known for his willingness to fight to the death.

Pete smiled down at Major and said: “Before you ask, no, I didn’t take you to your house or Nicky. And since you’re such a bright boy, college teacher and all, you’ve probably figured out that wasn’t Nicky on the phone back at her parents. While we’re at it, you don’t really think I would have taken you to Nicky, do you?”

“I don’t know what you might do.”

“You got that right. You sure as hell don’t know what I might do.”

Pete looked off across the heat distorted macadam where hundreds of pit bulls turned and swirled, swirled and turned at the ends of their leashes.

“We weren’t speaking of the devil,” Pete said, “but here he comes. He could answer whatever questions you have. He could, but he probably won’t.”

The man striding toward them across the wide mall parking lot was easily seven feet tall if not taller. Major had seen him a half dozen times and he could never quite believe how massive he was and at the same time as quick and nimble as a ballerina. He was wearing overalls that had been worn and washed to a brilliant white. His profile was sharp and clean, his eyes intensely blue, and had it not been for his long graying hair which he wore in a ponytail that reached the small of his back and his salt and pepper mustache, his age would have been impossible to estimate.

He could have been a young man or an old man or anything in between. Without saying a word he walked up and stood a moment looking down at Major. Then he turned, caught Pete in a powerful shake, and the two men half embraced as they bumped chests, still without either of them speaking.

Pete lifted his chin toward the men and women walking the pit bulls and said: “Looks like you’ve got the dogs out for a little fresh air.”

“I’ve got ’em out but fresh air has nothing to do with it. You knew that though, didn’t you?” When Pete didn’t answer, he seemed to notice Major for the first time. “Hello, Major. Glad you could come by. Did you ever see this part of the operation?”

“Not ... not really, Mr. Zack, not in the flesh, so to speak.”

Color rose in the big man’s face. “Not in the flesh? Now there’s a new one on me.” He turned to his son. “Your friend speaks in riddles and signs signifying very little.”

“Don’t speak in goddamn riddles and signs,” Pete said. “This is my daddy right here.”

Despite the pain singing along all the nerve endings of his body, it suddenly occurred to Major

that Mr. Zack had found him lying on the macadam at the back of a car with the trunk open and the crazy motherfucker had shown nothing to indicate that there was anything unusual about this. Rather he was just as chatty as a fucking housewife. But since Major was the one who was hurt and on his back, he knew he had to kiss Mr. Zack's ass, and apparently any other ass that was proposed to him.

"What I meant to say, sir," Major said, "is that I've seen pictures on the flyers you send out. And once on a news show I saw the dogs on leashes like this." He waved his hand to indicate the pit bulls on leashes being taken smartly through complicated drills across the parking lot. "They remind me of soldiers," he said, hoping that the famous crazy person would like to hear his dogs compared to soldiers.

He leaned down to look directly into Major's eyes. "Do you know why they're out here?" Major Zack asked. "Do you even know, son?"

"No, sir, I don't," Major said.

"This is the dogs' social hour. The terriers' biggest problem is that he has never been properly socialized." Pete did a little spin on his heels and put both hands on his head. "Ah, dad, really."

Mr. Zack turned on him. "I'll have to ask you to shut the fuck up, Pete. If you can't say something positive and nice about my animals, say nothing at all. They probably have nothing in their lives more important than what they're doing right now. And if it wasn't for the good people of the community volunteering to help me, it couldn't be done."

"Not everybody has volunteered to help," Pete said. "Some of these people want to see you hanging by your heels."

Major had already seen the crowd lining the edge of the parking lot out by the street. They carried placards lettered with various messages. Now and again they called insults to the old men and women leading the pits on leashes.

A young beautiful girl with shining blond hair sat cross-legged on the hood of a Dodge 4x4 and waved a sign that carried the blood legend: SEND THE DEVIL AND HIS DEVIL DOGS BACK TO HELL!

Speaking to no one in particular, Pete's father said: "There will always be those who oppose you, no matter who you are or what your work is." He turned then and looked down at Major. And it was as if he was seeing him lying there partially in the shade of the car for the first time. He eased himself down and sat down on his heels so that he could look directly into Major's eyes.

In what was nearly a whisper, he said: "I only know what Pete tells me about you."

"Don't believe it," Major said.

"So you tell me, what really happened to you?"

Major smiled or tried to smile with his cracked lips. "I walked into a door."

"It looks as though somebody ripped the door off the hinges and beat you with it."

From far across the parking lot, somebody screamed. A woman. Another scream followed, a scream unreal in its pain and terror. The cry was such that Major struggled to his feet. "What is it?" he kept saying over and over and over again. "What is it?"

"It's over there. Right where . . . What the hell's going on?"

A little knot of people pressed together in front of the girl with shining blond hair. She stood up on the hood of the 4x4. She was wearing designer jeans. Her face was twisted now in pain and horror or so it seemed to Major who could not help but admire how the designer jeans held and lifted and separated the lobes of her young ass.

Suddenly an old woman burst from the knot of people. The pit bull she had been leading on leash was up in her arms now. She was cradling the dog against her chest, or seemed to be.

"Oh my God," cried Major, "no, no, no!"

A wash of blood spilled down the front of the old woman's dress. The pit bull had his teeth buried in her breast and she was fighting to get him off. The girl on the 4x4 swung her sign to club the pit away but hit the old lady over the head instead and knocked her to her knees. The old lady was up and down and then up again. When she went down again, half a dozen pit bull dogs jerked out of their leashes and went down with her. Pits were jerking free all over the mall parking lot.

Pete's father raised his fist over his head and bellowed, "This is the most terrible thing in the world! This is the most beautiful thing in the world!"

Chapter Five

Major was a hero and he didn't think he much liked it. At least, not so far. Maybe it would be better when he was released from the hospital. On the wall at the foot of his bed was a picture of himself staring from the front page of the Sun Sentinel newspaper. He was holding the girl with the shining blond hair in his arms. An ugly nurse had brought the picture in and taped it to the wall at the foot of his bed the very first day he was in the hospital. It was not a good picture of himself. He looked dark and swarthy, like he thought, a Middle Eastern operator of a bordello.

He turned gingerly in the bed trying as best he could to protect the puncture wounds in his ass. He had been lucky, the doctor told him.

"Damn, son, you're lucky. The dog that nipped you had an incredibly clean mouth. Yes, lucky, very lucky indeed."

"Right, lucky enough to have my ass attacked by a gang of pit bulls."

"You were nipped," the doctor said. "You weren't bitten. If a pit bull had bitten you with his heart in it, you would right now be the sorry spectacle of a man without buttocks. But this right here, a few shots, few stitches, few days observation, and you're as good as new." The doctor gave him a broad wink. "Plus you're a hero. And that's a mighty big plus." Then the wink again.

Major wanted to say, "What's with the fucking wink?" But of course he did no such thing. He wondered though if the doctor knew more than he was telling. Did he know about the girl? Or that Major was responsible for her ruined face? Had the girl been brought to this hospital, too? Or had she been taken to another? Good God, she could be on the same floor. Even in the next room. The thought of meeting her bandaged like ten pounds of hamburger made his bowels roll and churn.

So Major Melton was an uneasy hero, but not uneasy enough to deny it. He himself was not entirely sure of what his motives had been. It had all happened too quickly with too little thought. Apparently, he had been the first one to see the bright blood spilling down the front of the lady's dress and the first one also to see that she was not holding the dog but that the dog was holding her. But instead of making a move to do anything about it, he had only jumped up and down and shook his hands like a child. It was intensely humiliating to think about. The talk of his heroism only made the humiliation deeper and more difficult to bear.

Mr. Zack, his face twisted in anger and grief, had turned to them when the trouble started. "Come on, boys. We got to get in the fight."

Pete ran shoulder to shoulder with his father across the parking lot toward the little knot of people, all of whom seemed to be screaming now. Major came after them, limping along as best he could, his mouth bubbling blood. Quicker than it took Major to turn his head to see it, the dogs had thrown several more people to the ground. Police squad cars squealed in off the street, sirens screaming, and behind them, fire trucks shook the ground with their air horns. From somewhere just outside the boundaries of the parking lot Major heard the quick popping of pistol fire. It frightened him so that he thought he might collapse.

From above and behind him, a woman began hysterically calling for help.

"For heaven's sake, help me! Get me down!"

Major turned and there above him the beautiful girl in her designer jeans wept, her hands buried

in her shining blond hair. On the other side of the Dodge 4x4 two pit bulls were struggling to climb onto the hood with her. Heavy white froth hung from their muzzles and they both breathed like small bellows. For the briefest time, Major regarded the way the designer jeans jacked up the girl's muscle quivering rump.

"Jump!" cried Major, holding out his arms. "I'll catch you. Jump!"

The girl glanced at the dogs gaining purchase now on the hood of the 4x4. She had no option. None. Major saw it and she saw it. She took one step and launched herself off the hood, lying flat on her back in the bright air above him. A fucking gymnast, he thought. Christ, what a leap! As she landed in his arms, a flash from a reporter's camera went off and caught the picture that went round the state and across the country.

What the camera didn't catch and consequently what nobody ever saw was Major's legs twisting and collapsing under him and the girl going into the macadam face first.

For an instant she did not move. Then she lifted her head and turned toward Major. Major's breathing stopped, caught in his throat. The girl had no face, only a reddish paste of blood and dirt from the hairline to chin. In the paste a wide O full of broken teeth opened. A purple tongue rose and worked in the bloody O, but no sound came.

It was then that two pit bulls gained the top of the Dodge, leaped, and narrowly missed taking Major's ass off.

It had been a week and Major had not had any visitors. Mr. Zack had been arrested for disregard of public safety, or some such thing. He had bonded out and God knows where he was now. Pete was no doubt sniffing and trailing Nicky. He wondered if they were performing smarmy little exercises at his house at this very moment. The house and the baby, she'd said. And if that's what she wanted, no doubt that's what the courts would give her. Major was supposed to get out tomorrow. Where would he go? What would he do? The Dean of the college had come in and told him to take some sick leave — as much as a month if he needed — to heal up. He looked a lot worse than he really was: swollen lips, blackened eyes, broken nose and great varicolored bruises growing in his skin like flowers. He had time. How to use it.

The ugly nurse came back into the room, her huge stocking-covered thighs making a sound like knives being sharpened.

Major said: "Would you mind ripping that fucking picture off the wall for me?"

"I cut that picture out and brought it in to you so you could tape it on your refrigerator ... something."

Major sat straight up in bed. His face was twisted and so red it was almost purple. "You ... you ... on my refrigerator? Or something? ... Bitch, you dare breathe the same air as I breathe?"

She put her hand to her face. Major pointed to the door.

"Get out of my room," he said. "Go find a hole. Get in it. And die in the dark."

Chapter Six

He got out of the hospital late in the afternoon. It was drizzling rain and heavily overcast. Thank God he had money on his hip for a taxi to his house. He knew full well that he may not have a house to go to, but he was going anyway. Major felt himself alone in the world with his back to the wall. His mother and father had long since gone to the grave. He had no brothers or sisters. He had always made friends with great difficulty, with such difficulty in fact that at the moment Pete was the only person Major had thought of as a friend. That bastard had now betrayed him and was no doubt lying up somewhere with his wife. And his son? He could hardly make himself think of the poor little bastard. When Major did think of him, it was only to try to imagine how he could steal him.

When the taxi got to his house, it was dusk but there were no lights on. Normally there were lights on in the house even when everybody was gone. He wondered if she had changed the locks on the doors. After he had paid the taxi fare, he walked through the misting rain up to the front door as quietly as he could and slipped his key in the lock. He was surprised when the door opened. He went into the darkened house, finally stopping where they had watched the football game together. He wanted to call his wife's name. But he knew the silence would answer him. Besides, calling her name would be silly and stupid. Still, a huge anxiety was boiling in him, an anxiety that only calling her name into the dark and empty house could relieve. Or so it felt. But that was irrational to the point of madness and he would be damned before he'd do it.

Then his head fell back, his eyes closed. He called: "NICKY."

The silence came hurtling back from the walls. What a child he was, a weak, fucked-up child. For a moment he thought he might start crying. And he realized he would have if he could. Everything came but the tears. Self-loathing, the feeling of utter helplessness, all of it washed over him. Everything but tears. The thought of suicide came to him, so strong, so unexpected that it scared the hell out of him. He laughed loud and long and knew the laughter was fake.

"Well at least I know what I ought to do even if I can't do it."

Somehow that did not comfort him. He started walking with great purposeful strides with absolutely no idea where he was going. It turned out that where he was going was the bed he shared with his wife. Major thought it a great bed, a California King. He went to Nicky's side of the bed and sat down. He smelled her. As he watched the bed, it came alive with the two of them. In memory he saw them there, naked and locked together, sweating. The very skin over his heart went cold with the horror of loss. How could his love for her gone so sour, become, she said, irrevocably broken? Yes, goddamit he had hit her. That was a fact. But behind that fact was another. He had never hit her without justification. Nobody knew his heart but himself, and he knew in his heart that whatever he had done was for her own good. Every son-of-a-bitch and his brother thought otherwise, thought they knew best how his family should be run.

He slowly stretched out on the bed and eased his head down on her pillow. Major did not sleep well wherever he happened to be, and he had gone through his stay at the hospital almost totally without sleep. God, he was tired. Exhausted to the bone. His eyes fluttered and closed.

Some time later, Major felt a hand on his neck, almost as if it was searching for the carotid artery. A woman's hand, incredibly smooth and soft. He thought he was dreaming. "You are a cliché"

Major Melton.”

—The voice was lightly accented, but Major did not recognize it. “I don’t understand,” he said.

“You have never understood.”

“Entirely too many people are telling me I don’t understand. Who the fuck are you and what are you doing in my house?”

“Your fortune is such that you have no house.”

“You know too much about my business,” Major said. Major could see the man well enough now. A chink of some sort. A Jap? Sure, that’s it. He was Nicky’s fucking Jap. Major raised his head to see better in the dim light falling from the window.

“Jesus Christ,” gasped Major. “I really don’t mean to upset you but I’ve seen dog’s assholes that were better looking than you.”

“You do not upset Bac Bong Suc.”

“With the name you’ve got and looking like you do, why haven’t you killed yourself?”

“Bac Bong Suc does not upset. But I should tell you this, White Boy, even the gentle souls of the Rising Sun have limits. Definite limits.”

Major Melton said: “Get out of my dream and out of my house.”

“Keep it up, White Boy and before the night is over I will dig up your dead mother and butt fuck her.”

“You crazy slant-eyed slope, how... ?”

“Nicky told me all about you and yours.”

“To what purpose, for God’s sake?”

“You shall see. In time, you shall see and know it all.”

Bac Bong Suc was easing away from the bed. Growing dimmer.

“Come back here! I don’t...”

But now he was gone, disappeared in the folding shadows. Major realized for the first time that he had not heard the Jap’s footsteps. And although he was wearing what looked like a silk robe there was no sound of the fabric swirling and swishing when he walked as there should have been. The Jap was silent as a shadow. Well, there was too much going on in his life to worry about a shadow.

And then, feeling as though he had never slept at all, something woke him up. The window showed first daylight. So he had been asleep. He moved just slightly and all the pain of the world shook him. His face hurt, his knees, his back. It felt like his skin was on fire. He touched his jaw and found it swollen big as a fist. And then he heard it, the sound that had awakened him. Something was very wrong. He eased off the bed and walked slowly to the window. Even the bottoms of his feet hurt. As he touched the blind to draw it back, the dog barked again. And there it was. There it by God was. The pit bull dog on a leash that was too short, tied to the only tree in Crippled Horse Acres. Major stepped back from the window. He almost fell.

Standing where he was, afraid to move, he screamed: “You ... you Jap! You lousy Jap come in here!” Then feeling on the verge of tears, he lowered his voice. “Please, Mister Jap, come back here. Please. Could you please?”

Major slowly sank to the floor and sat there, the dog barking and barking, not even stopping to breathe, just barking. A very few days ago Major had a lovely wife, a son, a good friend, a job he worked every day, a house, a future. Now here he was slumped on the floor of his bedroom calling for a Jap he did not know, while listening to the savage dog he did not like, and did not want, but could not get rid of.

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