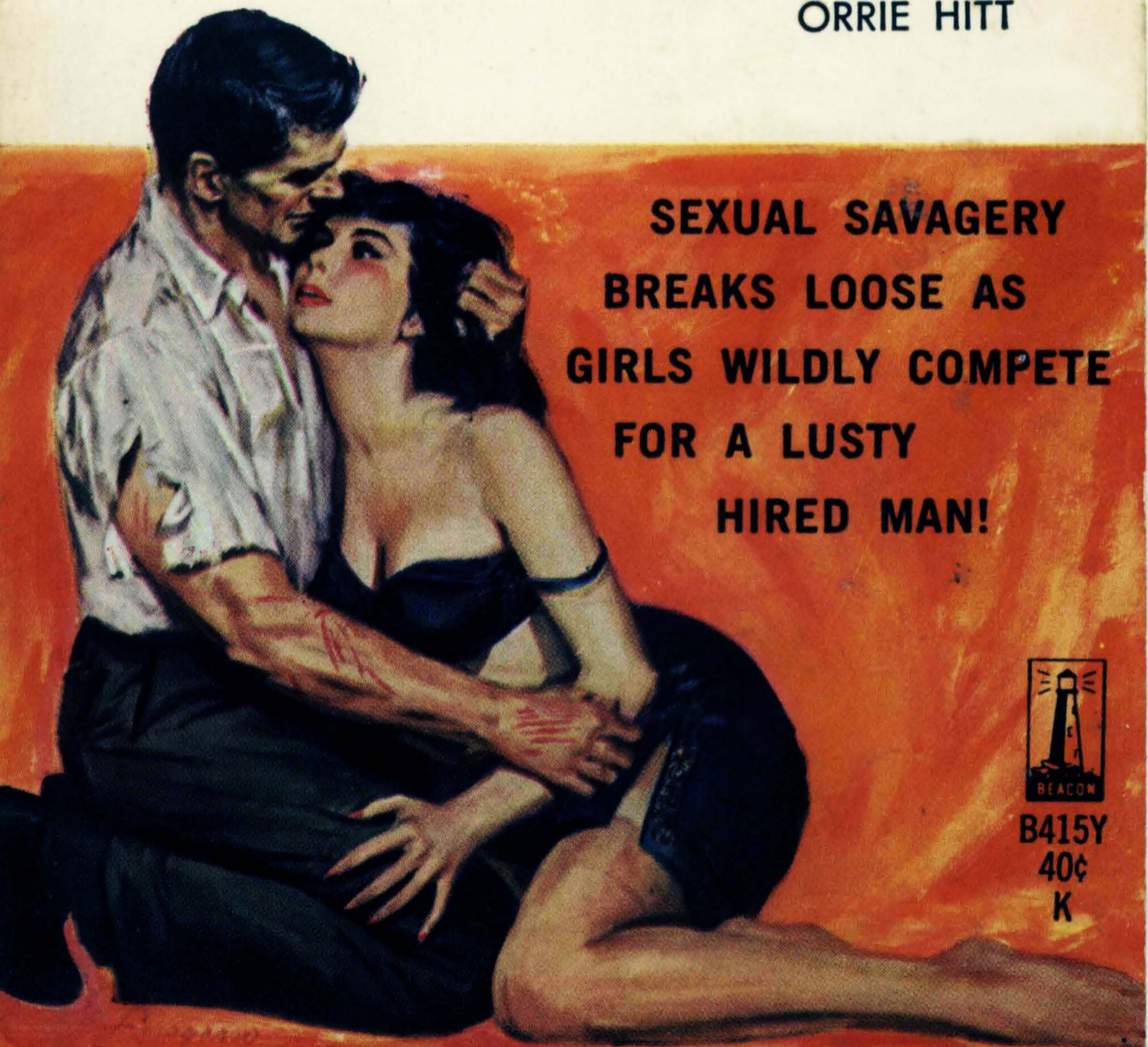


**WHY ARE FARM GIRLS KNOWN AS
UNDOMESTICATED ANIMALS?**

DIRT FARM

ORRIE HITT

**SEXUAL SAVAGERY
BREAKS LOOSE AS
GIRLS WILDLY COMPETE
FOR A LUSTY
HIRED MAN!**



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VIRGIN NO MORE

"I wasn't the first one," he said.

Her fingers hooked over the top of her suit and tugged it downward.

"Does that bother you?" she asked huskily.

"Some."

"Well, it was an accident. It happened on the school bus."

"Funny place."

"With the driver."

"Now I don't see—" He could hardly talk, and as she pushed the suit further down, his head pounded.

"He pulled into the lane and the next thing I knew I was in the back of the bus with him. He hurt me a lot the first time, but the second time it was okay. Only he wasn't careful with me. We were both scared—"

"You didn't have to tell me all that," he said as he leaned over her. He mashed her mouth under his. His lips came open wide, wide and hot, and he felt her fighting her way out of the suit . . .

DIRT FARM

Orrie Hitt



this is a BEACON BOOK

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DIRT FARM

CHAPTER I

BUTCH HAGEN, middle name Edgar, rolled over and sat up on the edge of the bed, reaching for a cigarette. It was hot in the room, almost as hot as it had been the night before. The sun blazed in through the window and splashed across the faded red rug. He lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply.

"That's the first thing you do every morning," Lucy Ellis said from behind him. "Smoke. I can't smoke until I've had a cup of coffee."

He shrugged tremendous shoulders and looked at the end of the cigarette. "I guess it's a habit, honey."

The bed moved as she sat up. Then she kissed him on the back of the neck.

"A habit like I am, Butch?"

He shrugged again.

"A guy needs a girl."

She kissed him once more, running her wet lips over his skin.

"You didn't make love to me last night," she reminded him.

"I was tired. That bus ride was murder."

He got up and walked over to the window, wearing only shorts. He was a massive man, six inches over six feet and weighing in at an even two hundred. During

his twenty-five years he had been in any number of brawls but nobody had ever licked him.

There was not much to see in the back yard except a dog on a chain. Butch studied the dog. He had always wanted a dog while he had been growing up, but the way he had been moved around from one foster home to another, it had not been possible. He had heard that foster parents often fell in love with their kids, but nobody had fallen in love with him. He had been too big and so had his temper, flaring up over nothing, because his confused mind had been fighting something he had not been able to understand. Why had his mother abandoned him on the front porch of a house, not yet a year old and wrapped in blankets? Why had she fled into the night, leaving him with strangers? He shook his head as he stood at the window. He did not know the answers and he never would. In fact, he did not even know his own birthday or his right name.

"Come back to bed," Lucy said. "Prove that you love me."

He sighed and pulled deeply on the cigarette. "I thought I'd look for a job," he said. "I've got to do that and you know it. Parkstown has only twenty-five hundred people. It isn't big enough for an employment agency. You have to see what's doing on the farms."

"You said you were here before, didn't you? Or were you lying?"

"No, I didn't lie. That was about five years ago. I had a job on a farm, and the owner thought I was putting the skids under his wife. He fired me, and I had to get out."

"Then what?"

"A little of everything, but mostly farms and following

the crops. Then the carnival came along and I thought it was a deal. It stunk. Last year I batted a semi up from the south and then down again in the fall. Like a sucker, I came north with it again this year."

"I'm glad you did, or we wouldn't have met. But I don't think I'd like it on a farm. That could be almost as dull as being in a girlie show, couldn't it?"

He turned from the window and stared at her. Lucy was only twenty, with long black hair that fell down to her shoulders. He guessed she was maybe thirty-eight at the bust, thirty-six around those pink hips. She wasn't too tall, about five feet, but her legs were long for her body and had nice lines. She came from Albany, not far from where they had quit the carnival, and it had been her first year in the racket. She had made fair money, stripping in the girlie act, but she had hated every second of it. When Butch had decided to leave, she had gone along with him without asking any questions.

"I could have stayed in New York State and worked the onion fields," he said, stepping into his pants. "But that's seasonal and I want something steady. Anyway, when Orange County lost the Cuban market, the price of onions dropped more and more. Half the little guys will fold this year, and the big ones won't break even."

Lucy twisted on the bed as he tucked in his T-shirt. "Butch, I just want you to get us squared away and headed straight."

"That's what I'm trying to do," he assured her, picking up his cigarettes. "We've got less than a hundred bucks between us. I've got to move fast."

She smiled, her lips full and red and inviting.

"Kiss me, you big goon."

He kissed her, bending down and running a hand over the smooth skin of her body.

"I'll help out," she said. "I'll do something."

"You won't be able to peel here for money, Lucy. They'd throw you in jail."

"I'd never strip again. I don't know why I did it in the first place. I was flat broke and miserable, so I fell for it—but I was about to quit, money or not, when you showed up. That changed everything."

"I know, Lucy."

He walked out of the room. It came back to him that the first time he had seen her he had liked her, but she had not been easy to date. When finally she did spend a couple of evenings with him, he had not been able even to kiss her. Then had come the night it rained, washing everything out, and they had gone into some bar. It was obvious that she was no drinker, but that night she let herself go, matching him glass for glass. When they danced he kissed her full on the mouth. And by the time the place closed at three o'clock she was ready to go to his cheap room with him. In the morning, ashamed of herself, she had cried, and after she cried they made love again. After that, they had roomed together in every town they hit.

Walking down the stairs, he faintly recalled having been in this house before, but so much had happened since then that he did not remember much about it. It was just a house with a roof on it, and the landlady, Mrs. Clemson, was a typical widow trying to pick up a buck.

He found Mrs. Clemson in the kitchen, rolling out dough for a pie.

"Hope you slept well," she said. She swept a strand

of gray hair away from her face. "You look familiar. Ever stayed with me before?"

"Yes. That's why I looked you up last night."

He borrowed a newspaper from her and sat down to look at it. There were the usual come-ons in the Help Wanted column. Sell name plates and make twenty dollars a day. He could just see himself trying to sell something. He did not know the first thing about it.

But one ad attracted his attention, calling for a farm worker at fifty dollars a week. That was not too bad—about what he had expected.

"Know anything about Friendly Farms, Mrs. Clemson?"

"Only that it's several miles out of town," she told him. "On the road to Newton."

He left the house and walked toward the main street. The place hadn't changed much, he saw. Just a few stores, some of them empty, and one peddling newspapers and magazines. A cab was parked in front of it. But the driver wanted three dollars for the trip, and Butch turned it down.

He walked to the edge of town, rejecting the idea of an early-morning drink, and caught the highway going north. There was not much traffic, and he had walked almost a mile before a decrepit truck carrying milk cans pulled up for him. The driver looked as old as his vehicle.

"Too hot to walk," the old man said as Butch got in. "You from around here?"

The truck shuddered as it started forward, the clutch making a sound like a pig squealing.

"I just blew in last night," Butch said. "I saw an ad about this job at Friendly Farms and thought it was worth a try."

The old man nodded and chewed on his cud.

“Go right by there,” he said. “I can let you off at the lane.”

“Know anything about the owners?”

“Clay Billings runs that farm. He comes out to the Grange once in a while when there’s something free to eat.” The old man glanced at Butch. “He’s a big one, not as tall as you but heavier. Around sixty, I guess. Big and tough. They say he’s a hard boss to work for but I wouldn’t rightly know. I got my own place, do my own work and I stick to it. Billings killed his wife with work and now he’s doing the same thing to his niece. The fields are no place for a woman, and his chores are too heavy around the barn.”

Butch lit a cigarette and said nothing. Some of the farmers he had worked for in the past had been rough, pushing every minute of the day, but he did not mind that too much. He was big and he could stand it. If they wanted a pint of blood, he went them one better and gave them a quart. Anyway, it would be an improvement over working for a carnival and running a semi that was about ready to fall apart—getting in late on a trip through no fault of his own and then catching hell about it.

“Good corn weather,” the old man said.

“Yeah. Hot nights.”

“That’s when the corn grows, son. Last year it didn’t get too high and I didn’t have enough to last. Had to buy outside and they pushed the price up just as the price of milk went down. Hell, if I had it to do over again I wouldn’t be in this business at all. Take Friendly Farms, though—that’s different.”

“Why different?”

“Because it’s big, one of the biggest in the county.

Today the small farmer doesn't stand a chance, no more than a man stands a chance with that Candy Roberts."

"Who's Candy Roberts?"

"The niece I was talking to you about. Even at my age I know a figger when I see it. She's got things to be proud of. Only you'd best not bother with her if you go to work for Billings. He catches you making up to her and you're out of work."

"I'm not interested in any girls."

The old man grinned. "You haven't seen her yet, son."

The truck groaned and shook, making poor time. Butch guessed he should have told Lucy he would be away for a little while, but he knew she would wait for him. She didn't care what she had to do, as long as he would marry her and earn a living. The only trouble was that he feared marriage. He didn't know why, except that he had seen so many couples who had not been happy, so many husbands who cheated on their wives, and wives who cheated on their husbands. No, he did not want that kind of a marriage. When he married, it had to be for love and it had to be solid. He had not been thinking of love when he had asked her to come with him. Or was it she who had asked him? He wasn't quite sure about that . . .

"Just remember what I told you about not fooling around with the girl," the old man said, stopping the truck. "Billings would muss you up good if you did."

"Thanks, old-timer."

Butch waited until the truck had moved on and then marched toward the big white farm house about a hundred yards from the highway. To its left stood a small house that also seemed in good repair. Behind all this

loomed a huge barn, its new red paint gleaming in the sun.

On either side of the lane the fields stretched large and flat, acres and acres bordered by woods. Butch noticed that the hay had been cut and that the clover was coming up again. He walked slowly, watching for a dog, but he did not hear one bark and he guessed there wasn't any. That was unusual on a farm.

It was a bad time of day to find a farmer in his house. Butch walked around to the back. A new Ford was parked there, and a big man with a shock of gray hair was just finishing changing a tire. With a giant kick, the man drove the hub cap into place.

"Hello," Butch said. "I'm looking for Clay Billings."

The man turned abruptly and squinted into the sun. He was naked to the waist, the sweat matting his chest hairs to his skin, and there was just the hint of a paunch at his middle.

"I'm Clay."

"Then I'm in luck. Butch Hagen is the name. I saw your ad."

Billings did not offer his hand. Butch was not annoyed. Some people just didn't shake hands.

"Well, you're large enough," Billings said. "Ever work on a farm before?"

"I've worked on several." He told about some of the farming jobs he had held, but didn't tell everything. He knew most farmers did not like drifters.

"I want somebody steady," Billings said. "This is steady work."

"I'm steady."

"I have only your word for that."

"And I have only your word that the job is steady."

Billings reached for the shirt he had left lying on the trunk of the Ford.

“This is a big farm,” he said. “We work hard.”

“What farmer doesn’t?”

“You’re out at six in the morning and you work as late as necessary. You get a day off every other week, and one night of the week you can use the car, if you don’t have one yourself.”

“I don’t.”

“Well, the car you use is a fifty-two Ford that belongs to my niece. Other nights you’re supposed to be here in case anything happens. You stay in that house over there with the other man. His name is Jeff Lane and he’s been with me two years. Two years, and already I’ve given him two acres of ground, good ground.”

“Mr. Billings—did I hear you right?”

“It’s sort of a bonus. If you stay with me a year I give you an acre and if you’re with me five years you’ve got five acres. Some farmers hand out Christmas presents, like a tie or a bottle, but I do it my way. The longer you stay the more you get. You stay with me long enough and you can borrow some money and start a farm of your own. I don’t want to hold anybody back. I started out with twenty acres and now I’ve got twelve hundred. Of course, it isn’t all fields, but the woods could be cleared. I only run a hundred head, plus a registered bull, and I’ve got all the open land I need.”

Butch nodded. Getting land for doing a job was a new twist. There was a lot to be said for it. Even if a man didn’t want to farm for himself, he could build a house on the acreage, or sell it.

“Where do your hands eat?” he asked.

“Right here in the main house. Lunch you take out to

the fields, but mornings and nights you have a hot meal. One thing more. My niece does the cooking and some of the outside work, and while I don't mind you talking to her, it can't go any further. The man before you, Ed Fulton, tried to kiss her one day. I beat the living hell out of him."

"I've got my own girl."

"There's a pond in back of those trees beyond the barn. A man can't even go in swimming when she's down there."

"All right. Do I get the job?"

"As long as you understand."

"I understand."

Ten minutes later Butch was on the highway to hitch a ride back.

CHAPTER II

LUCY WOULD not let him go until after five, and he was a little annoyed about that. He ought to be out on the farm, but Lucy had to have her loving.

“Well, there’s enough money to last you until I get paid,” he said.

“I know, and it’s nice of you, but I’d rather you worked in town. Not this town, maybe, but some other town. Maybe we made a mistake leaving the carnival, honey. What’s there on a farm but hard work?”

He freed himself from her arms.

“We didn’t make any mistake,” he said. “This room is cheap enough and I won’t need much to keep me going, just some change for cigarettes and a beer now and then.”

“I’ll look for a job. But I’ll look in town.”

“There’s nothing wrong with a farm. How many times do I have to tell you that?”

“Don’t be mad with me, honey. You’re getting used to living in town now. The job may be all right for a while, but you’ll get tired of it and we’ll move on. I know.”

Butch rolled off the bed and started to dress. Keeping five dollars for himself, he put the rest of the money on top of the dresser. Since he had not unpacked the night

before, he didn't have to do anything with the suitcase. Lucy cried some as he kissed her.

The only stop he made before walking to the highway was at a drugstore, the only one in town, to pick up a carton of cigarettes.

This time he did not get a ride in the first mile. He kept on walking, finally giving up on using his thumb whenever a car approached.

As he walked, he thought about his new job. He hoped it would stick. He was tired of moving from one boss to another. It was time he settled down. Even if he didn't marry Lucy Ellis, he had to put his roots down some time, some place.

About a mile before the lane that led to the farm, Butch got a ride with a shoe salesman.

"Best shoes in the world," the man said. "You won't get anything like them in a store."

"I couldn't afford any right now."

"So what? We've got a budget plan and we could work it out. You take three pair and all you pay for is two pair. Fair enough?"

But he did not buy the shoes.

The car moved on and Butch crossed the highway, swinging the suitcase. He was hungry, but he knew it was too late to eat, and nobody was going to fix a special meal for him. If the other man was in the house, he could find a room and bed down. The first thing he would have to get out of his pay was an alarm clock.

The front door was open, and Butch walked in.

"That you, Sherry?" somebody yelled from upstairs.

Butch put his suitcase down.

"No, it isn't Sherry," he yelled back. "I'm the new hired man."

Silence filled the house. Butch looked around. There was not much to see—a couple of chairs, a davenport, an endtable covered with dust, and a television set with a small screen. On one wall a metal disc covered a hole in the chimney, and Butch guessed the stove had been taken down for the summer. That meant coal or wood for heat, and cold rooms upstairs during the winter. He shrugged, then dug for a cigarette. Well, he was not going to worry about it now. Time for that when the snow started blasting across the flat fields, the wind crawling in through every crack.

Steps sounded on the bare stairs.

A young man stepped in. He was about average height, deeply tanned, with crew-cut brown hair. He wore a T-shirt, unpressed slacks and sneakers.

“You were gone so long for your stuff that Billings didn’t think you were coming back.” He held out his hand. “I’m Jeff Lane.”

They shook hands.

“Butch Hagen,” said Butch. “Well, it was his own fault. He could have ridden me in, but he didn’t offer.”

“That’s Billings for you. If you want something badly enough he makes you slave for it.”

“He said you’d been with him two years.”

“A little over two. Two years last April.” Lane shrugged. “If I can stick it out for another three or four, I’ll have a nice chunk of land. Then I’ll build me a little house and get a job in the highway department. There you’ve got a retirement plan and here you don’t. Anyhow it’s pretty rugged, this job. He needs a couple more hands, but he won’t put out for them. He works like a fool himself and he’s killing the girl.”

“How come she doesn’t leave him?”

"Because she'll get the property some day. Know of a better reason?"

"I can't think of one offhand," Butch admitted.

Lane sat down on the davenport. "You see her yet? Butch, isn't it?"

"Butch is right, but I haven't seen her."

"You've missed something. She wears those shorts and halters to keep cool. The old man don't like it, her dressing that way, but she just laughs and does as she pleases."

Butch took a chair and sat down.

"Sounds like a dish," he said.

"You're not just kidding. One evening when the old man was out, I followed her down to the lake. She was swimming in the raw and when she came out of the water I saw everything she had. If I didn't need this job and want the land, I'd have done something I'd been sorry for. So I watched her maybe ten or fifteen minutes, and when Sherry got out here I was in the mood to give her a hell of a session."

"Who is Sherry?"

"Sherry James. She's from Parkstown and we're sort of engaged. She works for one of those brush companies. She sets up parties at various houses, and then demonstrates brushes and things. Some weeks she has four or five parties, maybe more."

"Must do all right, then."

"Aw, it depends. Some women buy like crazy, some won't buy at all. She gives a fifty-dollar party and she's made twenty bucks. The hostess collects the money and delivers the junk for her. It's better than a store or an office. Days like today, she has a party in the morning and she can come out here at night."

“Billings object to that?”

“He hasn’t so far. Last winter during a big snow she was here for a week and he didn’t say anything about it. I got some food for her from the house and she got by. When I didn’t have to work we hit the sack.”

“Which room do I take?”

“Take your pick. Mine is at the top of the stairs, left, and I’m staying there because it’s warmer during winter —if it ever gets warm in here. The old bastard has oil at the main house, but we burn wood down here. You have to get up at night and fix the fire or in the morning you freeze to death. I tried to get Billings to put oil in here, but he says the wood is free for nothing and why should he spend the money?”

Lane yawned and sat up. In spite of his lack of height he seemed powerfully built.

“You hear about the guy before you? Why he left?”

“Billings told me.”

“Crazy thing. I told Ed he shouldn’t mess with that Candy, but you couldn’t tell him anything. He had it for her bad and he grabbed her in the barn. The old man caught him, and that was the end of it.”

“She sounds like she might be a heller.”

“I don’t know but she’d go for the right kind of a guy. Put a girl of nineteen out of circulation and you’ve got a fire on your hands.” Lane laughed. “If I thought I could get away with it I’d put her fire out, Sherry or no Sherry.”

They were still talking when a girl came in. She was small and delicate, and she had flaming red hair. Butch lumbered to his feet, and Lane said, “Sherry, this is Butch Hagen.”

She murmured something, and Butch nodded, then walked over to pick up his suitcase.

"I don't have a clock," he said to Lane. "Will you call me in the morning?"

"Right."

The stairs creaked under his weight as he went up them. He took the first room on the right, opposite the one occupied by Lane. He left the door open, hoping a breeze would find its way through the heat. Unpacking did not take long, and he only used one drawer in the old bureau. Then he undressed and lay down on the bed.

He stretched, closed his eyes. Maybe he had made a mistake and maybe he hadn't. He was not going to get rich at Friendly Farms, but he had not been getting rich with the carnival, either. And Lucy had been fed up with it, telling him night after night how she dreaded stripping for the customers. Whenever Butch had watched the show he had seen that she was not really a part of it, that she did not belong. The other three girls hadn't cared what they did—the brunette, the one with the biggest breasts, had been a real pig. Lucy had not been able to get used to it, and never would. She was just a nice kid who had made a wrong start.

Butch thought about what it would be like to be married to Lucy. She was not too demanding as far as money went. Still, marriage seemed a long way off. You had to have credit to buy furniture on time, and generally you needed money for a down payment. If you lived in town, there was rent to pay. If you didn't have a television set you didn't feel like much of anybody, and then a couple almost had to have a car. Even figuring that she would work, and he could save most of what he made, it would take months to get enough of a stake. And he was afraid of what would happen as soon as he had put away three or four hundred dollars. The idea of getting

married would not be enough to hold him in check, and he would go on a bender for a couple of weeks, picking up some tramp who only wanted a free ride. Then it would be over, his wallet empty, and he would be looking for another job—the same thing all over again. When he looked ahead, sometimes he was scared. Time was passing him by. Take away his strength and health and he wouldn't be able to make thirty dollars a week. And on a farm, no matter how much modern equipment they had, you had to be strong enough to hold up your own end.

He rolled over on his side, sweat standing on his skin, and he thought he ought to be getting more than fifty a week. He knew how to tear things apart and put them back together again. If a tractor would not run, he could usually spot the trouble and fix it as quickly as a mechanic. But working on the land was better than a town, a lot better.

Finally he slept, dreaming a little about the girls he had known, but none of their features would come into sharp focus. There had been that one foster home where the daughter was about eighteen and pretty, and when her mother went out shopping she had one boy after another up to her bedroom. Butch was old enough to know what sex was all about and he wanted some of that. His chance came one Saturday morning when the foster mother went to the store, and he walked right down the hall to the girl's room. She was alone, stretched out on the bed in a shortie nightgown.

"You're in the wrong place," she said.

He was scared, but he didn't let it show.

"No, I'm not. Other guys come here. They wait until

she's gone and then they're after you. Don't you think I know that?"

"I'm not anybody's girl."

"No. You're everybody's girl."

"Including yours?"

"Maybe."

She smiled faintly. "You might just be right. Why not try me and find out?"

He tried her, with the shortie nightgown up to her neck and almost covering her face, and they were like that when the old lady walked in, looking for her pocket-book. That was the end of that foster home. The next home he was sent to didn't have any girls, just an old woman who was trying to stretch out her social security payments.

As he came awake, Butch remembered the dream and he grinned, thinking about the girl. A few months later he had seen her on the street, her stomach swollen out of shape and her face strained. He had talked to her a few minutes, but she had not blamed him for anything. She had not blamed anybody in particular . . .

He was still awake when Jeff Lane and the girl came upstairs, talking and laughing and making a lot of noise.

"That new man is big," he heard her say. "Isn't he?"

"Like a giant."

"Candy will make a play for him."

"She hadn't better, and he hadn't better be around if she does."

"Don't tell me you haven't had ideas about her, honey."

"Sure, I have. Any guy would go for her, but I want my job and, anyway, I have you. It's a long grind, saving the way we are, but we'll make it one of these days. I'm

not going to throw it all over because of some girl with a shape.”

“Aw, kiss me and shut up.”

After a while the door across the hall closed and it was quiet in the house.

Minutes later Butch was asleep again. And this time he did not dream.

CHAPTER III

MILKING WAS not so bad. Billings was there to help, and the equipment was new and modern, the cooler handy to the main section of the barn where the cows were housed. At the far end of the building, past the cows, a huge bull pawed the floor, shaking his head and snorting.

"He wants what I got last night," Jeff Lane said, dumping the last of the milk. "Only he won't get it today, unless somebody comes around with a cow that needs to be serviced."

"There's one due at eleven," Billings said, running water into a sink. "But you won't have to bother with it, Jeff. Either I'll handle the bull or Candy can."

"That's dangerous for a girl," Lane said.

"Not with the staff fastened in his nose ring, it isn't. A kid could lead him around like a baby."

Breakfast was at seven-thirty, and Lane and Butch returned to the house to wash. The water was cold, but there was plenty of soap and it wasn't too hard to get clean.

"If I had the guts, I'd like to be that Candy's private bull," Lane said as he dried his hands.

"I guess you could get in trouble that way."

"Yeah, and it's the only thing that stops me. I've got too much to lose and not enough to gain. The chances

are she wouldn't complain none, but then again you never know. When you see her you'll know what I'm talking about. If you had high blood pressure she'd give you a stroke."

It was still too early to go up to the house for breakfast, so they hung around the living room awhile.

By the time they went outside, the sun was beginning to blaze. It looked like a hot day coming up. For haying it would be ideal, with just the right amount of breeze blowing. One day on the ground and the hay would be ready for the bar, the natural juices locked inside the tiny strands.

In the kitchen, he forgot all about that, because Candy Roberts was there, and she was everything Lane had said. When Billings was not looking, he followed her movements as she roamed the kitchen, and felt his pulse quicken. She wore shorts that were cut high and a halter that had all it could do to restrain her big breasts. She had blue eyes and ash-blond hair. She said nothing as she worked, but she didn't have to say anything for a man to know that her voice would be low and soft. Once when she bent over the table to pour more coffee for Billings, Butch got a look down the front of her halter, and it looked to him like she meant him to see. Yet she gave only one sign that she was aware of him, a faint smile, and that annoyed him.

Her uncle swore as she poured coffee over the rim of his cup, and she jumped. It was plain that she was afraid of him.

"What do you know about cars?" Billings asked Butch suddenly.

"A little. Why?"

"Candy's won't start."

"Maybe it's the battery."

"Can't be. The battery is new."

"Did you check the connections on the terminals and the ground?"

"They're all right."

"How does it act?"

"Well, you get a click when you press the starter button."

"Sounds like the relay switch to the starter, or the starter itself."

"How about looking at it this morning?"

"You're the boss."

"You'll find tools in a shed behind the barn. We do almost all of our own repair work in there, and you won't want for anything." Billings turned his head. "There's a cow coming at eleven, Candy. You make it your business to be up here and handle the bull."

"I'm afraid of the bull," she said. Her voice was low and husky, as Butch had known it would be.

"Then get over being afraid of him. He won't hurt you none. You use the staff on him and you've got nothing to worry about."

"That's what you always say, but I can't help it. It isn't a girl's work."

"Maybe not, but you do as I say." Billings' face darkened. "I brought you up, didn't I? Your father killed your mother and then himself and you didn't have anybody else. I saw you through high school and now you're going to pay me back. You hear that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, don't forget it."

Breakfast was over shortly before eight, and Billings told Butch where to find the car. Butch took one last

look at the girl as he left the kitchen; and something told him he ought to pack his clothes right now and leave. But he shrugged his massive shoulders and forgot it. If a man ran away from trouble before it happened, he'd never quit running.

Billings had been right about the car. Butch recalled that hitting the relay switch would sometimes free the contact points, and he tried that. It didn't work—all he got was a click when he pressed the starter button. Next he put the car in low and tried rocking it back and forth to release the starter if it was jammed, but that did not help. He sighed and jacked up the front of the car so he could crawl under it. All he could do now was to drop the pan from the flywheel and remove the starter.

He worked for a while under the car, getting dirty and greasy. He had trouble with some of the bolts on the pan. A few of them were up high and he had difficulty getting his hand up there, twisting himself out of shape and cursing the man who had designed the car. Finally, however, he removed the last bolt, dropping it into an empty tin can, and started to work on the starter. As he worked, he thought about Candy Roberts, and the sweat poured down into his eyes. Lane had said she went swimming in the raw. That would be something to see, all right.

As soon as he had freed the starter, Butch crawled out from under the car, pulling the starter after him. A quick examination disclosed that a spring toward the end of the shaft had broken. Probably the best bet was to buy a second-hand starter from a junk yard and put it in.

"Hi," a voice said from behind him.

He turned. It was Candy Roberts, standing with one hand on her hips. "You find the trouble?" she asked.

"It's the starter. It's shot. You could have it fixed but it wouldn't be worth it. And I don't know if you could get a spring for a car this old."

"There's a junk yard in Parkstown."

"Then that's the place to try."

She gave him a smile.

"I see you had to jack up the car to get under it."

"I wouldn't fit under there if I didn't. Being big can be a handicap."

"Or an asset," she said.

She reached up to adjust the halter, making her breasts strain upward, and Butch dropped the starter on the ground. He wanted to grab her right there, shove his body against hers, bring his mouth down on those lovely lips.

"How did you make out with the bull?" he asked thickly.

"That's still to come."

"Want me to handle him for you?"

"Thanks, but my uncle would be sore if you did. And the bull isn't so bad after he's been with a cow. He digs at the ground with his feet but he minds pretty good. That doesn't stop me from being afraid of him, though. You never can tell with a bull. We had one once that pulled the ring right out of his nose and killed two calves before my uncle shot him. This one is the bull that we got after that. He's registered and the service fees are good."

"How old are you?" Butch asked suddenly.

"Nineteen."

"That's awful young. And you're too pretty to be stuck on a farm in the country."

"Maybe, but you heard what my uncle said this morning. I'm paying him back for what he did for me."

"He said your father killed your mother and then himself."

The girl nodded, and her face was grave.

"Because my mother got pregnant by another man. They had a farm at the other end of the county and somehow this hired man got at her. He ran off, or my father would have killed him too. I was too young to remember much about it, but I remember the funeral and how they couldn't open the caskets. Then my uncle Clay took me in and I've been with him ever since."

"What happened to the farm?"

"They rented it, and the equipment wasn't worth much. The court or somebody sold it and the money went toward expenses. My uncle claims he paid most of them but I don't know whether he did or not. I've only got his word for it."

"You like your uncle?"

"I'd rather not talk about that. Besides, I've got to be ready when that cow gets here."

She left, and Butch watched her go, noticing the roll of her hips and the trim movements of a fine pair of legs.

Then he walked up to the house. It was tough to get clean with the cold water. The soap just rolled off the grease, and he had to scrub for a long time.

After he had washed as best he could, he walked out across one of the big fields. Billings had not told him to do anything else when he finished with the car, but he did not want to hang around doing nothing. If he lay down and rested he would only think about the blonde, and he did not want to think about her. He had a steady job and he had a girl in town. All he needed was the time

to be with Lucy, and she would make him forget Candy Roberts was alive.

He found Billings in the field, kicking at the hay and cursing, and he saw that Lane was busy cutting in the next field with the tractor. A hay baler and another tractor stood near the edge of the field, under an apple tree.

"This stuff should be drying but it isn't," Billings complained. "Ten to one it'll rain tomorrow and most of this junk will be as good as lost."

"Doesn't look like rain."

"That's just when it happens. Overhead the sky is clear, but you look past the mountains and you can see the thunderheads coming up."

"I could fork some of it over," Butch said.

"Wouldn't do no good. What about the car? It running?"

Butch told him about the starter.

"How much?" Billings wanted to know.

"Three bucks. Five bucks. I don't know."

"You could run in with the Ford and pick one up."

"Whatever you say."

"Take Candy with you and she can pick up our groceries. Sometimes she drives the truck behind the baler, but we won't be able to get any of this in today. I know farmers who would, the damn fools, and then their barns burn down." Billings reached into his pocket. "Here's ten for the starter, and don't forget to bring back the change."

"What about paying for the groceries?"

"They're charged, if it's any of your business. I pay once a month on the dot. Nobody has to hound Clay Billings for what he owes." Billings cursed again. "Maybe the storm will go around us. If it does, I'll work your tail

into the ground tomorrow. You and Candy both. She'll wish she'd been born a man."

Butch left Billings standing there, still cursing, and started toward the house. He supposed he did not care much for Billings, but that did not have anything to do with his job. As long as he got his fifty a week he was not going to complain. Figure in his room and board, and it came to about seventy-five. That could be worse. The carnival had been worse, except for the nights of making love after taking on a load of beer.

"Get back here for milking!" Billings shouted after him. He said nothing, but kept going.

Candy was sitting on the back porch when he reached the house, her thighs apart in a way that made it hard to keep his eyes off them.

"You done already?" he asked.

"Sure. It doesn't take long. But that cow was small and the bull almost killed her. She couldn't get up for a couple of minutes."

"Your uncle says you're supposed to go into town with me for groceries."

"Oh, hell," she said. "That means a dress."

"You're all right the way you are."

"But not in town. They pick you up for wearing shorts. But it's okay if you show up at the river in a bikini. Does that make sense?"

"You've got me."

"Wait for me while I dress."

"Sure."

She went into the house, and Butch sat down on the steps, lighting a cigarette. Trying to imagine how she would look in her room.

A few minutes later he heard the screen door open

behind him. He got up and turned around, and his breath caught. Candy was wearing a yellow dress, short at the knees and low in front, and the material of the dress clung to her curves like paint.

"Stop staring," she said.

But she was not angry. She was laughing, and as she came down the steps he stared some more, especially at the two breasts that rode free and easy under the dress. His mouth went dry again.

"Sorry," he said as they moved toward the car.

She reached over and touched his arm briefly.

"That's all right. I'm used to stares. When Ed Fulton was here he stared all the time."

"And it got the best of him."

"Well, he did get carried away. I fought him, but it didn't do any good. He was like a crazy man."

They got into the car. "You got a girl?" Candy asked as they reached the highway.

"Yeah."

"Around here?"

"In town."

"She come with you?"

"You ask a lot of questions."

"Well, I was just wondering."

"Yes, she came with me. We got a room and the next morning—yesterday morning—I saw the ad in the paper for this job. I was glad to get it."

"My uncle tell you about the land you get each year?"

"He did."

"I guess it's okay. With two men it would take him six hundred years to give the farm away. And he doesn't give away any fields. Only woods."

"The woods can be cleared. The fields you see were

cleared by somebody. They didn't just grow that way."

"I suppose not."

Butch lit a cigarette. "Your uncle works you pretty hard, doesn't he?"

"Hard enough."

"Any reason for that?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I think he hates me, just like I thought he hated his wife. He made her do the work of a horse and it killed her. But I'm going to fool him. I'm young and I can stand it."

"Most girls would just leave."

She crossed one leg over the other.

"I'm not most girls," she said. "I'm me, and I know if I wait long enough the farm will belong to me. He showed me his will and it's right there as plain as anything. If I walked out on him he'd cut me off and the state would get it. I'm the only relative he has, and it would cost money to fight a new will in court. I think I'm doing the smart thing."

The windows of the car were down and the breeze got at the hem of her skirt, lifting it a little. Butch had a hard time keeping his eyes on the road.

"You swim?" she asked after a while.

"Sure."

"I go in every night when it's hot, but it's no fun swimming in the lake alone. You could come down there with me."

"Your uncle said I shouldn't."

"He tells every new man that, but he wouldn't know. As soon as he has his supper he takes a nap for an hour or so. You could cut through the field and the woods, and you'd be safe. Maybe you could show me how to dive.

I'm not so good at it, but of course we don't have a diving board. You have to do it off a rock ledge."

When they got to town, Butch left her at the grocery store and drove to the rooming house. Lucy was in the room, and he could see she had been crying.

"I thought you left me," she said as she hugged him. "I didn't hear from you and there wasn't anything else for me to think."

He kissed her hard. She wore nothing but her underthings, and he unhooked the snap of the bra, pulling it down over her arms and throwing it to the floor.

"What made you think that?" he asked.

"Because some men do those things. You know they do. A man has a girl for a little while and then he doesn't want her any more. He gets somebody else and the girl is left behind."

"I just didn't think of calling," he said. "And I don't think I can call you every night. The boss might not want me using his phone."

"Is there a place where we can stay together?"

Butch shook his head. He could have told her that Lane had his girl come out there, that nothing was said about it, but somehow he did not want her chasing him around. Times when he was off, he could get into town and they would live it up. For the moment, that was enough.

"I'll pay for your room and meals," he said.

She stepped out of her panties.

"After next week I can do it," she said. "I got a job in a store, but I don't start until Monday. The pay is only forty a week, but Mrs. Clemson said I could eat with her for ten and that means I can get by. We'll bank what you make, and in a few months we'll be able to settle down.

And I asked about a job for you at the store, honey, and they said they were going to put a man on pretty soon, a man to stock the shelves, and you could do that. All we need is a couple of rooms to start out and we're all set. Isn't that great?"

"Yeah, sure."

This time when she came to him her tears were gone, and he took her down to the bed, his mouth hot on her lips and his hands roaming her body. He closed his eyes, imagining that she was the blonde, and when at last he took her, she cried out with joy.

It was late when he left her—too late to go looking for a starter, so he drove back to the store. He could always tell Billings the junk yard didn't have the right kind of starter. Probably it didn't make much difference whether Candy's car got fixed or not.

Candy was waiting for him at the curb, a box of groceries beside her on the sidewalk.

"We missed milking," she said as he put the groceries in the car.

"Sorry."

"You're sorry? We'll both be sorry when my uncle starts yelling. What took you so long?"

"I was busy."

Candy smiled as she got in beside him. "What was her name?"

"Who said it was a girl?"

"Because you men are all alike."

He did not answer, and they drove back in silence. And it was just as hard for Butch to keep his mind on his driving as it had been before.

CHAPTER IV

THREE DAYS later, Clay Billings was still yelling at Butch, pushing him to do the work of two men.

"I phoned that junk yard," he said. "They had that starter and you were never there. What do you think I am, anyway? Some jerk who pays you to lie to me?"

"Not on your life."

"Well, don't lie to me again. You lie to me once more and you're done."

Butch did his work and tried to hold his temper. If it hadn't been for Candy, he would have knocked Billings down and quit, but just being near her kept him in a fever of excitement. Nights he dreamed about how she would be, and when he woke up he was always in a cold sweat. A couple of times he had thought of following her down to the lake after supper, but he had been afraid to risk it. Billings was sore enough at him already, and if he made one more mistake he would have to pack.

"You're chicken," Candy told him once. "Aren't you?"

"A little."

"Just remember that I wouldn't ask everybody."

The third night he had to work late after supper, hauling bales of hay up to the barn. It was dark when he finished, and he decided he was really being taken for fifty dollars a week. Not many farmers shoved it to you

the way Billings did, and not many hired men would put up with it, job or no job.

"You're a sucker," a voice said to him as he was walking toward his quarters.

It was Candy Roberts. Even in the darkness he could make out her white shorts and halter.

"So I'm a sucker," he said, halting. "What am I supposed to do? Challenge him to a duel?"

"Not exactly."

"Then you tell me."

She was silent for a moment.

"I wish I could, Butch, but I can't. You see what he does to me, making me run a tractor and cook and keep the house and help out in the barn. I just finished up myself and I'm dead. I didn't even get my swim today, and I missed it."

"It isn't too late to go now."

"But not alone. Not at night."

"I couldn't go. I haven't got any trunks."

"You don't need them after dark."

Butch hesitated, licking his lips.

"Your uncle would raise hell if he found out I went with you."

"Meet me at midnight, and you won't have to worry about that. He'll be settled for the night then, and he sleeps like a log."

He knew he shouldn't, but he knew he had to go with her.

"Okay," he said. "Midnight."

"I'll bring a light so we won't break our necks in the woods. Though my uncle wouldn't cry too much if it was mine."

"He hate you that much?"

"I don't know if you could call it hate, but I know he resents me. His own wife could never give him a child; or anyway she wouldn't, and he worked her to death because of it." She paused. "But I'd better be getting into the house, or he'll have a fit. He has to have a cup of tea before he goes to bed, and he won't fix it himself."

She faded away and Butch moved on, wondering if that redheaded Sherry James would be out again, and if she and Lane would make love. She was supposed to be selling brushes and other junk at parties but he did not see when she could be holding her parties. All of them could not be during the day and she was out here every night, getting here around nine and going up with Lane to the upstairs bedroom. The night before, Lane hadn't closed his door and she had been crying about something, like Lane had hurt her beyond anything she could stand.

There was no car in front of the house, and Butch guessed Sherry was working for a change. A light shone from the living room, and that pleased him. He had a deck of cards in his room. Maybe he could talk Lane into a couple of games. If he was going to meet Candy at midnight he would be smart not to go to bed.

He entered the house, pulling the screen door shut behind him, and almost bumped into Sherry James.

"I thought you were Jeff," she said, backing away. "We had a fight and he took the car to go and get some beer. I thought I missed it when he drove up." She shrugged. "But I should have known better. Once he gets up to a bar he won't quit until he's just about down. Then he'll get sick and have a headache." She shrugged again. "Why should I worry about him? He doesn't worry about me."

She crossed the room and Butch watched her. She had a nice body. Of course she wasn't any Candy Roberts,

but it struck Butch that if Lane was going to spend the night in some bar, he might be able to cut a little grass with her. He told himself that Lane would do the same thing with Lucy if he had the chance.

“Too bad you two had a fight,” he said.

“It isn’t the first one. We had one last night.”

“And you came back for more?”

“I came back to find out what he’s going to do about me.”

“What does that mean?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I guess I’d rather not talk about it. It seems like I’m always in a mess of some kind or another. Sometimes I’m about ready to quit.”

A car pulled up in front of the house and stopped. Moments later a door slammed, and then there were heavy footsteps on the porch.

Lane came in, carrying two six-packs of beer. He put them on a little table and tore one of the cartons open, then hunted in his pocket for an opener. The girl said nothing, and he did not speak to her.

“Have a beer?” Lane asked Butch. “It’s cold.”

“Thanks, I could do with a can. I’ve still got half of that hay stuck in my throat.”

“Help yourself. You’ve got two hands.”

“I’m going,” the girl said at last. “If you’re going to get drunk, I don’t want to be around to see it. When you sober up you can call me—if you feel like it.” She walked to the door. “And you’d better feel like it, Jeff Lane. You’d better make up your mind to do what’s right. I’ve given enough for you and I’m not staying in this alone.”

Butch got up to pour a beer for himself, and Sherry went outside. She raced the motor as she drove away.

"Women," Lane said, making a face. "Women can make you sick if you let them."

"She's sore about something, huh?"

"Not so sore as she is knocked up."

"That's bad enough."

"Hell, I can't afford no kid now."

"You should have thought of that before."

"Yeah, and that isn't all. She sent her company a check that bounced and they suspended her for thirty days. So now she hasn't got any job and she's got a kid inside of her."

"Why don't you marry her?"

"Because it doesn't fit in with my plans. Five years from now I'd take a fling at it, but right this second I'm thinking about that land." Lane opened another can of beer. "I've got a little money in the bank, more than enough to pay for an abortion, but the trouble is she wants the kid. She says when you make a baby you should have it. I tell her that's crazy. Later on if she wants a brat she can have it. I've got no time for one this year or next."

Butch brooded silently. What would he do if he got Lucy in the same situation? He drank two cans of beer slowly. Lane poured the stuff down like he was trying to drown himself in it. And the more Lane drank, the thicker he talked.

"I'd like to bounce that Candy Roberts," he said. "I'd give five years of my life just to shack up with her for a night. In the morning I'll bet they'd have to carry me out of the room on a stretcher."

Lane was nearly drunk and half asleep when Butch left the house shortly before midnight. The moon was high and bright now. Candy had not said where they

were to meet, but he guessed it would be around the barn. He lit a cigarette and took up a position in the shadows.

This, he told himself, was bordering on insanity. He had a steady job, such as it was, and a good girl in town, and he should not be fooling around. Not only that, but he needed his rest. Farm work was hard work and Billings did not let up on him for a second. Even his lunch period did not last half an hour, only fifteen minutes, and this business of working after supper could wear a man down, no matter how big or strong he was. Some farmers provided salt tablets for their help, but not Billings.

“Waiting long?”

She drifted toward him, the smell of her perfume strong and heady. He could not be sure, but he guessed she was wearing a dark one-piece suit.

“No, not long.”

“I almost missed you. If it hadn’t been for the cigarette I wouldn’t have known you were here.”

“No use advertising myself, is there?”

“He’s sleeping like a log and he won’t know a thing.” She took Butch’s arm, guiding him around the corner of the barn. “I just hope you didn’t say anything to Jeff Lane about this.”

“I’m not that crazy.”

They started across the field toward the woods.

“Tough for you to be stuck out here every night,” she said as they walked along. “You must miss your girl.”

“Not right now, I don’t.”

She laughed and squeezed his arm.

“You’re just saying that, aren’t you? To be nice?”

“Not exactly. We came to Parkstown together but

that's about all there is to it. I got this job and she's taking one in a store. Probably she'll meet some other guy and she'll forget all about me."

It was a long walk across the field, and they took their time. It was fine having her hand on his arm, smelling the perfume she used, and a little something that was woman mixed in with the smell of the grass. A slight dew had come down already. That was not good. The hay would have to dry the next morning before they could safely start to bale it, and that might not be until almost ten. Billings would curse and rave because of the delay, and he would be tough to work with. Most likely it would mean another evening in the fields for Butch.

"I don't figure your uncle," he said, more to himself than to the girl.

"Nobody can. He's just hard and mean, there's nothing you can do about it. I've been working for him steady since I got out of high school, summers and weekends and nights before that, and he's never given me one cent of pay. If I need a dress I have to beg for it. And the car he says is mine really isn't. It's in my name, like the new Ford. But that's only so he can't be sued in case of an accident. I don't get to drive either one of them very much, unless it's to the Grange or some place like that. He won't let me go out alone, and he won't let any boys come here to see me. I couldn't even go to the dances when I was in high school."

They reached the woods, and she walked ahead of him along the path, using the flashlight. The path was narrow and rough, not much more than a deer trail. On either side of the path the trees were thick with leaves, and the moon was no help.

They had only gone about two hundred feet when

Candy suddenly slipped and fell, hitting the ground with a thud. The flashlight rolled away. He swore and bent over her, listening to her moan.

"You hurt yourself?" he asked.

"I think I've twisted my ankle."

He took her by the shoulders, lifting her, but she cried out in pain, and he had to put her down again.

"I don't think I can walk on it," she said unevenly.

He began to sweat as he picked up the flashlight.

"Here comes trouble," he said. "I'll have to carry you up to the house, and your uncle will find out about us. Then I can kiss my job goodbye, and he'll boot you around."

"I don't think it's broken."

"It doesn't have to be. A sprain is bad enough. Sometimes a sprain is almost as bad as a break."

She managed to sit up.

"I don't want you to take me to the house. The lake isn't far—you can carry me down there. We'll sit on the sand, and if I rest the ankle it might get all right. If it doesn't, you just leave me there and he'll know where to look for me in the morning. I'll just say I went for a swim and hurt myself, and couldn't get home. That way he won't know about you."

"You're regular," Butch said as he picked her up.

She was light in his arms, and it felt fine to have her there. He had the flashlight in his left hand; the backs of her thighs were warm against his skin. His right arm was under her shoulders and his hand lay against one full breast. It was hard to keep from digging his fingers into that mound of flesh, but he fought down the urge and moved slowly forward, following the path, and making sure of his footing.

Then they were on the sand of a little beach. The moon shone upon them now, and Candy's hair was the color of the sand. She lay down, stretched out on her back.

"You're awfully strong," she said.

He looked at her. "There isn't much to you."

She laughed and took his hand, playing with it for a moment and then placing it on one full breast.

"Only in a couple of places," she said. "One is right here."

A pounding in his head started at the base of his neck and crept up over his skull. "Yeah, you're big enough up there," he agreed huskily.

"Bigger than your girl?"

"Quite a lot bigger."

She sighed, and he felt her breast lift against his hand.

"You like them, don't you, Butch?"

"Yes, and I like you."

"How much?"

"More than I should."

He moved his hand higher so that he could feel the bare flesh above the top of her suit. Her hands pulled him down as he lowered his mouth to her waiting lips. She kissed him back, her mouth open and hot, and sobs of a frantic desire rising up in her throat. His hands roamed her body, fighting the suit, and when he could not get it down any further she helped him, still kissing and moaning, her tongue a lance of fire.

In a few seconds she was naked on the beach, her suit cast aside, her injured ankle forgotten for the moment. She begged him to hurry, not to keep her waiting, and he didn't.

Finally, exhausted and beaten, he lay beside her on the sand, his mind a blank, every nerve-end numb.

“Will you do something for me?” she asked after a while?”

“Anything I can.”

She rolled over and kissed him.

“It can mean a lot of money to you.”

“Tell me more.”

She kissed him again.

“We’ll talk about it, Butch—but not right now.”

CHAPTER V

JEFF DID NOT call him the next morning, and they were both late getting up. The only reason they got up at all was that Clay Billings was downstairs roaring like a bull.

"Five minutes you've got," he shouted before the door slammed behind him. "Five minutes to make the barn or you can both look for other jobs!"

"We'd better get going," Jeff called from the other room. "Damn, I never heard the alarm, and he's sore."

"I'm on my way."

They went downstairs together. The storm that had threatened had not come up, and it was a fine morning, the dew heavy and smelling of clover.

"He won't fire us," Butch said without conviction.

"Don't fool yourself."

"What would he do with the hay?"

"Get somebody else to help. He can get school kids this time of year, and they work cheap. He had one last summer and he didn't even carry insurance on the fellow. Lucky for him something didn't happen. Clay used to stand behind the rig when it was being backed up to the barn, the way he does with you—you know?—and I told him he had ought to be careful."

Butch knew. Billings made him nervous when he did that, standing with his back to the barn, right under the

mow opening, and waving his arms. One extra shot of gas to the tractor at the last second and he would be crushed.

Billings was raving when they got to the barn. Candy had not shown up, was not in her room.

"Whore," he shouted, kicking an empty pail. "Hot little bitch, going out for the night and getting her ashes hauled. When she gets in I'll break her back."

"Maybe she hurt herself," Butch offered hopefully.

"Hurt herself? Where?"

"How would I know?"

They started milking, and Butch began to sweat. It was a cold sweat, and even his insides felt cold. She had been a good sport to stay by the lake all alone, but how was he going to get her uncle to look for her?

"I'll have to go up and try to get breakfast," Billings said after a while. "Hope you guys will settle for coffee. The way you loused up this morning, it's all you deserve."

They finished up after Billings left, then started back to the house to wash.

"Candy must have been putting out last night," Jeff said.

"Maybe."

"Some guy got his fun."

"Maybe."

They washed in cold water, taking turns, and Butch dried on a dirty towel. At the usual breakfast hour they went up to the main house for their coffee.

"Maybe I was wrong," Billings said when they entered the kitchen. "I just thought of something. Candy most always leaves her bathing suit on the clothesline out back, and it isn't there now. I know she missed her swim after supper. Maybe she went out in the dark."

"She could have hit her head on the rocks and drowned down there," Jeff said.

"Shut up!" Billings hollered, spilling some coffee. "Don't say that, Lane. She's the only one I've got and I don't want her dead. Why, I don't even have any insurance on her. Had a policy but I let it go because of the way the agent used to look at her. Then I come into the house one day, quick like, and he's kissing her and putting his hands on her. God damn, I ran him off the place with my gun. And I tore up the policy. Tore it up and gave her my belt over the rear. That guy never did come back."

Butch ran his fingers through his hair. "I'll look for her," he offered.

"You never been down to the lake."

"I'll find it."

"I'll go with him," Jeff said.

"No, you stay here," Billings told him. "The hay won't be ready to bale just yet, and you can start cutting. Do the south field and make that tractor hum. You get that done and then move up to the next field. And don't sleep late again. I don't like it. Those cows won't wait for you, and neither will I."

Butch left the house and started across the field. The clover still smelled good. He liked the soil and everything that went with it, the hard work and the sweat. He wondered now why he had ever left the land, why he had gone with that carnival. That had been a crazy thing to do.

He took his time crossing the field, thinking about Lucy Ellis. He guessed now that he should have left her with the carnival. Right now she was sort of in the way, and he did not know what to do about it. She did not think much of his working on a farm, and she had marriage on

the brain. She wanted a home and kids and money in the bank. That was pretty hard to manage on a farm, especially when you worked for wages. But, to his way of thinking, it was the right way to live. You were out in the air and it was healthy work, better than busting your back with a semi and jumping from town to town, paying for a dumpy room and sleeping with any girl that would have you.

Entering the woods he began to sweat. Maybe Candy had lost her head the night before and would hate him today. That happened sometimes. A girl gave herself to a man and then she was ashamed—the way Lucy had been that first morning . . . crying, saying she hadn't meant to do it—and then wanting him to do it again, clinging to him in a wave of passion.

The deer flies got after him, and he swore. Deer flies were always bad in the woods. They could bite hard. They could even draw blood from a horse. He knew it was the sweat that attracted them. They liked sweat, and when your hair got wet with it they liked to get into that, their wings singing in your ears.

Now, as he approached the place where Candy had fallen, he began to hurry. Maybe she had busted that ankle. That would be bad.

The lake appeared ahead presently and then he saw the beach. Candy was stretched out there, her hair almost as pale as the sand.

He stood over her, looking down. She was asleep.

"Hey," he said.

She stirred.

"Hey," he said again.

This time she opened her eyes, frowned for a moment against the glare of the sun and then smiled up at him.

"What a long night."

"How's the ankle?"

"I can't walk on it."

"Hell!"

"I tried, after you left. It wasn't any good."

"Your uncle's good and sore."

"I can imagine."

"You should hear the things he called you."

"I can imagine that, too." She laughed as he sat down beside her.

He lit a cigarette. "You sorry?"

"No."

"That makes two of us."

"He may beat me."

"Not with me around, he won't."

"That would cost you your job."

"There are other jobs. And if you wanted to go with me you could. I'd like that fine. You wouldn't have to work the way you do, and I'd be good to you."

She sucked in her breath and her breasts rose against the material of the swim suit. She held her breath for a second and then let it out in a long rush.

"I like it here," she said.

"He pushes you around."

"I don't care if he does. He's always pushed me around. But I'll get mine some day. I'll get the place, like I was talking about last night. Maybe we could share it. You'd go for that, wouldn't you?"

"Who wouldn't?"

"Well, it's worth waiting for, and there are ways." She wet her lips with her tongue. "Right now I want a kiss. I want you to hold me so tight it hurts. I want you the way I wanted you last night, Butch."

Something was bothering him and he had to put it into words.

"I wasn't the first one," he said.

Her fingers hooked over the top of her suit and tugged it downward, exposing her breasts. Butch's head began to pound as he saw the tilted mounds tipped with red, the centers no longer sleeping.

"Does that bother you?" she asked huskily.

"Some. I didn't figure anybody ever had the chance."

"Well, it was an accident."

"I see."

She cupped her hands to her breasts, and the pounding in Butch's head got worse.

"It happened on the school bus."

"Funny place."

"With the driver."

"Now I don't see—" He could hardly talk, and as she pushed the suit further down, his head pounded harder than ever, like a hangover that wouldn't let up.

"The lane was the last stop and my uncle wasn't home. I admit I had sort of a crush on the guy—he was married—and I used to kiss him once in a while before I got off. Then this night when my uncle wasn't home—it was winter and Jeff was doing the milking alone that day—he pulled into the lane and the next thing I knew I was in the back of the bus with him. He hurt me a lot the first time, but the second time it was okay. Only he wasn't careful with me and we were both scared that he might have given me a baby. We didn't do it again."

"You didn't have to tell me all that," he said as he leaned over her.

"But I wanted to. You have a right to know." Her lips moved against his. "I didn't get pregnant then but I

want to get pregnant now. I want your child, Butch. I want to have your baby.”

“Your uncle would shoot the both of us.”

“He won’t be around to do it.”

“How do you know?”

“I just know. Don’t ask. I just know.”

It was insanity, making love to her there on the beach in daylight, risking everything, but the pounding in his head drowned out all caution. He mashed her mouth under his. His lips came open wide, wide and hot, and he felt her fighting her way out of the suit, then her arms coming around his neck.

Later she got into the suit, and he picked her up to carry her to the house.

“I love you,” she said softly as they left the beach. “I love you, Butch.”

“You’re out of your mind. I’m nobody.”

She kissed him on the neck.

“I don’t care what you are. You’re my man and I need you.”

He stopped walking for a second and kissed her. “All right,” he said.

“What about the girl in town?”

“She doesn’t count.”

“Are you sure?”

“Now you’re the one who’s asking all the questions. Yes, I’m sure.”

“Then prove it to me.”

“What, again?”

“Again. And right here. Here in the woods under the trees. Before we go up to the house.”

“Later,” he said.

“But how can we, if I can’t walk?”

"I don't know. Doesn't your uncle go to the Grange meetings?"

"Once in a while. He goes down there and tells everybody how they should farm. I don't think the people like him."

"There's a lot about him to dislike."

"You'll find out more about that as you go along."

She was not heavy, and he didn't have any trouble getting her to the house. Billings was outside waiting for them. When he saw she was alive he cursed her, demanding who the man was, calling her names. While he raved, Candy sat on the porch step and said nothing.

"She ought to have a doctor look at that ankle," Butch said when he got a chance.

"She can walk on it. Don't tell me she can't. The hell she can't. You can see for yourself there isn't much swelling. She just don't want to do her work and she's using it for an excuse for being out all night." He cursed again. "I ought to slam you," he shouted at her. "I ought to pound your bottom and see how you like it. Now get up and get going. Don't give me none of your lousy lip."

"I'm not lying," she said at last. "Honest I'm not, Uncle Clay."

"Shut up and get on your feet."

"Uncle Clay—"

"Shut up."

She tried to get to her feet, but immediately lost her balance. She fell off the side of the steps onto the grass. Butch swore under his breath as she rolled over and sat up, tears glittering in her eyes.

"Well," Billings said. "Well." Billings rubbed his forehead. "Well, I guess you wouldn't have done that on purpose. Nobody in their right mind would take a header off

those steps. So you help her in the house, Butch, and sit her down to where she can call the doctor. Then we'll go down in the fields with Lane. If that sun has done the job, we ought to be able to start putting up some bales."

Butch went over and picked her up.

"The bastard," he said when he got her inside the house. "The dirty bastard."

"Now you know how I've lived."

"Yeah. Only it isn't living. I've worked for some rough characters but he sets the pace. I could smash him silly and never feel sorry about it."

"Wait for your chance, honey."

He put her down near the phone in the living room, and she said she was comfortable enough.

"I'll get Doctor Watkins," she said. "He treated me for the flu once and he's all right."

He kissed her long and hungrily before he went outside.

"She's a slut," Billings said.

"I think you're misjudging her."

"No, I'm not. She's just like her mother was, always ready for a man. I blamed Ed Fulton that day out in the barn, but the more I ponder it, she must have led him on."

"She may not be able to walk on that ankle for a while."

"Seems like."

"Who does the cooking, then?"

"I don't know. I suppose I'll have to get somebody through the paper to pitch in. None of us could open a can of beans."

They crossed the first field, and the sun burned down on them. It was a good day for haying—there was just

enough breeze to help it dry. But Butch did not want to be haying.

"You'll have to work after supper tonight," Billings said.

"I know."

"Lane is in a jam."

"I know that, too."

"Got that girl knocked up and don't know what to do about it." Billings laughed and spat toward the ground. "Easy to knock 'em up, isn't it?"

"I guess so. One spin of the wheel and you've got a winner."

Billings kicked a stone out of the way and stumbled as he stepped into a woodchuck hole.

"I'd like something young," he said. "Maybe I'll hire a young girl to do Candy's work. That wouldn't be so bad. Nights when I was married, the old woman was too tired mostly to do anything and she wasn't any good when she did. Maybe if I met the right one I'd get married again. I don't know. I'm the last of my line except for Candy and a man ought to have a kid. Ain't that right, Hagen?"

"If you say so."

"I could afford a young wife and I'd give her hell in bed. I'd really give her hell seven nights a week. I'm like a bull that way and I've been without it too long."

They walked on, approaching the baler, and Billings went on talking, but Butch did not hear the words. It was hard to pay attention to anything, when he could still feel the touch of Candy's body against his arms, and the taste of her lips on his.

CHAPTER VI

THEY WORKED through until dark that night, without supper, and when they finished Billings asked them in for sandwiches and coffee.

"It isn't much," he said. "But I don't know how to fix anything else and the doc says Candy can't get around for a couple of weeks. So she sits on her fanny while I have to bust my hump trying to get somebody to do the cooking."

"The next girl won't work in the fields," Butch said before he bit into the ham sandwich. "Or the barn."

"I don't expect her to," Billings agreed. "That's for blood relation and not a hired girl. Blood relation should be out there doing a job. And Candy getting hurt isn't going to help us none. That means the rest of us have to work harder."

Butch ate thoughtfully. He ought to call up Lucy and say hello, but Candy was in the living room, resting on the davenport, and he didn't want to spoil it with her. If she turned out to be pregnant there would be a mess, a stinking mess with Billings, but the chances of that were small. He would stay on at the farm, working and making love to Candy—next time he wouldn't run any risk—and if Billings should drop dead they would both be in clover. He would marry her—hadn't she said she was in love with

him?—and they would own the farm together. With a place this size, they could float a mortgage if Billings didn't leave enough cash, and they would add another fifty head of cows. Give Butch half a chance and he would make it one of the best farms in the state. He would go to the fairs with some of his stock and win ribbons.

"I'd like some tea," Candy called from the living room.

"Come and get it," Billings said.

"I can't, and you know it. Didn't the doctor say I should have a pair of crutches?"

"Something like that."

"Well, then?"

"So I put an ad in the paper to rent a pair. Why should I buy them for a couple of weeks? You go down to that lake at night again and I'll bust your leg for you the next time."

"Be just like you."

"Shut up."

"I'll fix the tea for her," Butch said.

Billings stared at him. "Suit yourself, Hagen. Make her a whole gallon and let her soak her foot in it." He turned toward the living-room door. "Say, Candy, what about Epsom salts? The doc say anything about that?"

"No."

"I'll get some tomorrow anyway and you soak your foot. You think I like paying out good money to hire a girl in your place?"

"You wouldn't do it if you didn't have to."

"All right. Shut up."

Butch found the tea in a can over the sink, and he put some water on to boil. All he had to do was to look at Billings and his anger began to boil. The girl couldn't

help herself, and Billings did not care. Almost anybody else would have gone out and bought a pair of crutches for her. Not Billings. When she went upstairs or to the bathroom she would have to crawl on her hands and knees.

Butch fixed a cup of tea, and it looked strong enough to float an iron wedge.

"Cream or sugar?" he called.

"No. Plain."

He carried the cup and saucer inside, dropping the spoon along the way, and she gave him an inviting smile.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. How's the ankle?"

"Hurts."

"Need anything else?"

She gave him a knowing wink. "Not anything that I can have right now."

He returned to the kitchen and the rest of his sandwich.

"I can't eat," Jeff Lane said, pushing his plate aside.

"You worried?" Billings asked him. "About the girl?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Well, don't worry. Either marry her or kick her out. What can she do about it? Take you to court? So what if it costs you fifteen bucks a week until the kid comes of age? You bought your own trouble, didn't you, Lane?"

"I sure enough did." Lane got up from the table. "How about using your car for a couple of hours?"

"I guess there's no harm in it. Only don't race it the way you did that other one. That thing is new and I don't want it slopped up."

"Thanks," Lane said. "I won't go over thirty, thirty-five."

Lane went out. Butch finished his sandwich. The coffee was not bad, he had a second cup. Working through lunch and supper had made him hungry, and the hay had made his throat dry.

"Lane is a good man," Billings said.

"Yes, he is."

"And he minds his own business."

"I guess so. He doesn't bother me any."

Billings stared across the table at him, unbuttoning his shirt and exposing a hairy chest.

"You like it here, Hagen?"

"It's a nice farm."

"Anything else?"

"No. The equipment is in good shape and that makes the work easier. I've been on farms where it wasn't easy."

"Remember what I told you about my niece."

"I remember."

"See that you do."

Butch left shortly afterward and walked through the moonlight toward his sleeping quarters. A car was out front and he guessed it belonged to Sherry James. That did not please him. He did not want to have to get mixed up in her affairs.

Sherry was sitting in the living room when he entered, a bottle beside her on the floor. He could see that she was half drunk. The two top buttons of her blouse were undone, exposing part of a pink bra.

"I never knew you drank much," Butch said.

She shrugged. "Only when I'm in the dumps. Tonight is one of those times. I'm tired and disgusted and sick of life." She lifted her glass. "Here's to the unwed mother. Isn't that a hot one?"

"It may work out for you."

"How?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I know. It won't work out. Jeff came in to change and he told me to go to hell. He said for me to yell my head off and it wouldn't do me any good. He said he'd deny he ever slept with me and that blood tests after the baby is born don't prove anything. How do you think that hit me? I'll tell you how it hit me. Right in the belly. And me suspended from working for thirty days. Of all the rotten things to slap me in the face just now. So the last of my money went for the bottle and a tank of gas in the car." She looked up at Butch. "You got any money, honey?"

"None to speak of."

"Nuts. Have a drink."

"I don't want to rob you."

"You won't be robbing me. I've already been robbed. He took what I had and he gave me something in return. Have a drink, fellow. If I drink it all I'll only get sick. I brought the bottle thinking I could talk things over with Jeff, but it didn't do any good. He's got some number down the road, one of those farm girls, and he's going to blister her the way he blistered me. I know. I've seen them together when he didn't know it. Only he's a fool. She isn't old enough. Seventeen."

Butch got a glass and helped himself to a drink, taking a short one and swallowing it fast. He coughed after it went down, then poured another one. He did not like rye very much, but it was better than nothing.

"That's foolish," he said.

"Sure it is."

"Sting a dame like that and you get stung yourself."

When you're legal you almost have to prove it against the guy, but a girl that young just has to point."

She crossed her silken legs.

"You think I'm drunk?"

"A little."

"So what business is it of yours?"

"None."

"Then don't fight with me."

"I'm not fighting. What the hell. You've got a gripe, but I didn't have anything to do with it. I'm not the father of your kid."

"But you wouldn't walk out on me if you were?"

"I don't know what I'd do. That's a fact. You say you'll do one thing, you do something different. Maybe you were running around, too. How does he know?"

She shook her head.

"There was never anybody but Jeff. Never. I put on a brush party at the Grange and he was there. He bought a couple of things and we seemed to hit it off right away. When he asked me for a date I said yes. Then after that, on nights when he couldn't get to town and I was free, I came out here to see him. We'd have a couple of beers and talk. It was real nice. Then one Saturday night—Saturday is a bad night to book a party because everybody is going someplace—he got me upstairs, and you can guess the rest. I didn't leave until the next afternoon. It seemed all right because he said he loved me." She laughed and reached for the bottle. "Love? What the hell is love? Getting into bed with a man? Then this thing came along and he soured on me. I was all right until I got pregnant, and now I'm no good. Is that the way men are?"

"Some men."

She unbuttoned the third button on her blouse, and leaned back.

"I'd like to show him. With a big, good-looking man like you."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want to get into the middle of something. Maybe if you were around him more it would help. Billings needs a girl to cook for a couple of weeks, and you aren't doing anything."

"I can't cook."

"That's fine."

"I couldn't even fry an egg."

"What would you do if you were married?"

"I guess I'd have to learn, but I'm in no hurry about that right now." She gulped her drink. "If I had the money, I'd take Jeff into court. I love the guy but he's got to do right by me. You'd feel the same if you were in my position. No folks, no real home, no nothing."

Butch said nothing.

"I guess there's no point to me staying around here," Sherry said.

"No."

"I'll take my bottle and go back to town."

"Go ahead."

"You don't care, huh?"

"Why should I? You're his girl."

She started out, with her blouse still unbuttoned, and Butch went to his room upstairs. It was hot up there. He yawned as he heard the car drive away, tires spinning in the gravel. Then the night was quiet.

He undressed slowly, turned out the light and lay down. The bed was too short for him, and he hit both

the top and the bottom of it, but he was used to that. Beds were made for average people.

Candy . . .

Candy with the shape, and the blonde hair, and the lovely eyes. Candy who could love with passion, and who was crazy about him. It was good, and not just the sex part of it. Sure, sex was necessary to marriage, but there had to be more to it than that, a deeper feeling between two people, male and female, that had nothing to do with the physical side.

He turned on the bed and wondered about Lucy. Lucy would be hurt when he quit on her, but he couldn't help that. Maybe Lucy should have stayed with the carnival. She had the equipment, and she could swing it when she felt like it.

He was almost asleep when he heard somebody stumbling up the stairs, the footsteps heavy and uncertain.

"You're drunk, honey," a girl's voice said.

Jeff Lane laughed thickly. "Gimme a kiss, Mae. Gimme one of those wet kisses like you gave me in the car."

"Later."

"No. Now."

The footsteps stopped for a moment and then continued. Butch blinked, tried to relax. Jeff was bringing the girl to his room. That was bad. Billings had not said anything about Sherry coming there, but it might be different if he found out about a young girl.

"Close the door," the girl said after they entered the bedroom.

"What? And cut off the breeze?"

"I'm thinking about the other man."

"He won't hear us."

"How do you know?"

"Hell, he's probably dead to the world by this time. Billings really works us around here. You hit the sack and you're done."

"You hadn't better be done." The girl laughed. "I didn't come over here to listen to you snore. And, anyway, I shouldn't have come. What am I gonna tell my old man if I stay all night?"

"Who says you're going to stay all night?"

"Because I want to." She laughed again. "You love me, honey?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Then to hell with my old man. I don't owe him nothing. Let him think what he wants to think."

There was not much talking after that. In a few minutes Butch could hear heavy breathing and the girl's low moans, a series of moans that ended in a long, shuddering gasp.

It was none of his business. Butch rolled over and went to sleep.

CHAPTER VII

IT WAS raining the next morning, and all Billings had fixed for breakfast was coffee and toast.

"I hope somebody answers my ad," he said. "We need a woman around here that can stand on her two feet."

Jeff Lane looked terrible. After he drank his coffee he threw it up in the sink.

"Bad night," he said as he returned to the table.

"You ram the Ford?" Billings wanted to know.

"No. I drove it like you said."

"You drunk?"

"I wasn't sober."

"Maybe the woods will sober you up."

"Huh?"

"Just what I said. The hay is out for today, and you might as well work up some wood."

"In this rain?" Butch asked.

Billings nodded. "Rain won't hurt you none. And the wood will dry some between now and fall. That'll make it burn better over there where you stay."

"Wish we had oil or coal."

"Be satisfied with wood."

"Guess we'll have to be."

"Wood burns good. You just have to bank the fire with big chunks and then you're all set."

"What about cutting the wood on my land?"

"I don't care where you cut it. Wood is wood."

Candy called out for a cup of tea, and Butch fixed a cup. She smiled at him as he carried it in to her, and after he had put it on the table, she pulled his head down to kiss him hard on the mouth.

"Miss me?" she whispered.

He nodded and ran his hands down over her body.

"Something fierce," he admitted.

"Me, too."

He went back to the kitchen, still feeling her lips hot on his mouth. He looked out at the rain. It was coming down hard. It looked like a steady one, slanting from the east, the wind driving it against the side of the house. They would be wet in five minutes, and it was a good way to catch a summer cold. But Billings didn't figure it that way. Billings was paying for work and he wanted it done, weather or not.

"No use putting it off," Butch said to Jeff.

"I guess not."

"Where's the saw?"

"There's two of them in the shed. You take one and I'll take the other one. We'll whack hell out of those woods. Take a chain saw and you can really go to town."

"Maybe I'll open up a can of soup for lunch," Billings said.

"Soup would be good," Butch told him. "It may be summer but that rain is cold."

They walked through the rain toward the shed. By the time they got there they were soaking wet.

"He can be a miserable cuss when he wants to be," Jeff said.

"Yeah. He asks for eighteen ounces to the pound."

They gassed up the saws from a five-gallon can, and checked the oil.

"We ought to just stay in here," Jeff said.

"He'd get sore if he found out."

"He's sore anyway. He's sore at Candy for wrecking her ankle. Most people would be worried, but not him. All he's worried about is what it's going to cost. He'll have to give a woman about forty a week until she's around again and then he'll take it out of her hide." He wiped his forehead with the back of one hand. "You hear us last night?"

"I heard you."

"That Mae is a hot number. You haul your freight with that and you know you've been with somebody."

"Isn't she a little young for you?"

"Fellow, I like 'em young."

"Young enough to end up in jail?"

"She won't talk. And, anyway, she does it with a lot of different guys. She couldn't prove anything if the deal went wrong. She don't fool me none. Nights when I can't see her she's making out with the farmer boys."

"What about Sherry?"

Jeff Lane shrugged.

"She's past history. To hell with her. So she's going to have a kid? So what's so unusual about that? Lots of girls have kids."

"Even so, you ought to help her."

"That's my business, isn't it?"

"Right."

They carried the saws across the fields into the woods. It was wet in the woods, with fog rising from the ground and the rain dripping from the leaves overhead. Most of the trees were oak, and that made good firewood. The

one winter Butch had lived in a shack, he had burned oak, and had no trouble except one night when the chimney had burned out. That was the trouble with burning wood. Wood made soot, and soot sometimes caught on fire.

Jeff's land bordered the highway—a good location—and they started back far enough so they would not hit the power or telephone lines.

“Cut the stumps high,” Jeff said. “That way, I can get some leverage on them when I pull them out with a tractor and chain.”

The saws barked into life. Jeff went to work on the first tree. The blade of the chain saw cut into the wood, and Butch hunched his shoulders to the buck of the machine. That winter when he had cut wood, he had done it by hand. This was easier. In a couple of minutes the tree was down, hitting the ground with a crash, and he went to work on the limbs.

They quit at twelve.

“Better take the saws with us,” Jeff said. “Billings wouldn't like it none if we left them lying around.”

It didn't matter to Butch. He carried his on his shoulder. The rain was colder now, coming down harder. Even if it cleared before evening, which did not seem likely, it would be a couple of days before they could go back to the hay. On one of the farms where Butch had worked, the owner had a hay drying machine; but Billings didn't have one. Not many farmers did. They were expensive, and a lot of years they were not needed.

The Ford was gone. They put the saws in the shed. Butch felt uncomfortable, but there was no sense in changing his clothes. He would only get wet again.

They washed up, then went over to the main house. Nobody was in the kitchen.

"You'll have to shift for yourselves," Candy called from the living room. "My uncle went into town to interview some girl about the job."

"Nuts," Jeff Lane said.

"There's soup under the sink if you want it. The left door. And pans hanging near the stove."

Jeff sat down at the table. Butch went about fixing the soup. When the soup came to a boil, he poured it out into bowls and carried one to Candy. She was sitting up, soaking her ankle in a pail. He bent down and brushed his mouth over hers.

"Tastes like more," she said.

"Don't press your luck." He straightened. "That's rough out there," he said.

"I know, but my uncle told me to tell you you didn't have to do it this afternoon."

"What changed his mind?"

"Because he got wet himself when he serviced a cow with the bull. Wet and stinking. Then somebody called about the job, and he drove into town. It was the only call he got. Women don't want to work on farms any more. Why should they, when they can get paid more for less work in town?"

Back in the kitchen, Butch dug into his soup. He thought about his free afternoon. If he could only get Jeff out of the way, and if Billings stayed in town long enough . . .

"Wish the other Ford was fixed," Jeff Lane said.

"What would you do if it was?"

"Borrow it and look up Mae." Lane grinned. "Still, I

might go down there anyway. I can't get any wetter than what I am and it isn't too long a walk."

"What about her people?"

"They visit her grandmother in Newton when it rains."

"I see."

"And she stays home, waiting for me or any other guy who comes along."

"How did you meet her?"

"At a dance. She was with a fellow, but she had a fight with him and asked me to take her home. Sherry was with me, and after I dropped her off in town I borrowed her car for the night. And what a night that was. Mae was practically asking for it even before she closed the car door. She said it was nice in the park and why didn't we go up there. I got back just in time to milk the next morning."

"You'd be smart to leave her alone."

"What, and let all that stuff go to waste? You kidding or something? As long as it's there, I'm going to get my share."

In the end Lane decided to walk over to Mae's house, and he left Butch with the dishes. Butch did not care. As the door closed behind Lane, he hurried into the living room.

"I spilled my soup," Candy said.

"Where?"

"Down the front of my halter. That means a dry one."

"I don't know how you're going to get it. You can't walk."

"Well, you can."

"True."

"It's the room at the end of the hall, on the right. You'll

recognize it because I fixed it up with stuffed animals when I could afford them, and I like that. My uncle even gave me a big bear last Christmas. You wouldn't think I was grown up, because I sleep with it."

"Any particular halter?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm not going anywhere. You'll find them in the top drawer of the dresser. There's a red one there that I favor, but you suit yourself."

"How did you get the set you've got on?"

"I climbed up the stairs on my hands and knees. My uncle wouldn't do anything at all for me—he just kept shouting. He said the doctor should have examined me to see if I'd had any relations with a man, and then he'd be satisfied. But doctors don't do that, do they? I mean, not unless the girl complains? And how can they tell?"

"I don't know, but they can."

Butch climbed the stairs. The steps were bare wood, and his feet sucked at the water in his shoes. Upstairs it smelled faintly like the barn, that strange odor that comes from cows, and he guessed Billings did not change his clothes or bathe often. A lot of farmers were that way. The only time they got wet was when they were caught in the rain. One of the places he had worked, the man had worn his socks a month or more.

He found Candy's room. It was a nice room, neat and clean. The bed was made, and the bear was sitting in the middle. He grinned at the bear. That bear had all the luck.

It was easy enough to find the halter, but he took his time and looked at the other stuff in the drawer. Candy did not have many underthings. The bras looked too small for her. He fingered one, then turned over a pair

of panties, and found a pistol. It was a .32, loaded and ready to fire.

He returned the gun to its hiding place and closed the drawer. Guns, he told himself, were not unusual on a farm. Most farmers had them, either for sport or protection.

By the time he got back downstairs, Candy had removed the wet halter. Her big breasts were naked and swollen, the under curves firm, causing the tips to lift.

"Thanks," she said and got into the halter.

"You're welcome."

"You were gone quite a long time, and this thing was right on top. You look through the drawer or something?"

He sat down and stared at her.

"Maybe," he said.

"And you saw the gun?"

"Maybe."

"What do you think of me having one?"

"I don't know. I didn't think much about it. I guess you've got your reasons."

"Ed Fulton is one of them."

"But he's gone."

"He said he was coming back. He said some night when my uncle was out he was going to get me. He's working just down the road on the Collins farm. Some night he's going to rape me, unless he gets interested in that Mae."

"She must be the one Jeff Lane is seeing."

"She's no good. She was only fifteen when she ran away with a man. She told the man she was eighteen, and he didn't know. They got all the way to Florida before they were picked up. She admitted she lied about

her age, so they let the man go on probation, but she's been a heller ever since. There isn't a man or boy in Sussex County who hasn't had his turn."

He sat down. She sloshed her foot in the water, spilling some of it on the rug. The rug was red like the ceiling, and the water made dark spots where it landed.

"This isn't doing any good," she said, looking at her foot.

"Give it a chance. Those things take time."

"You suppose my uncle will get somebody?"

"I don't know. I can't figure him out at all. Why should he hate you so much?"

She removed her foot from the pail and wiggled her toes. If her foot were swollen, it was not obvious.

"I don't think he hates me all the way. He's just superior and he has to show it, yelling all the time that I've got to pay him back for what he did for me. Well, I didn't ask him to do it. I was just a kid and I didn't know what it was all about. People told me my mother had been bad and my father had been worse, killing the way he did. I was scared, and there wasn't anybody else. Besides, my aunt was alive at the time and she was good to me. Uncle Clay killed her with work. She worked in the fields the same as I do now, and she had the house to take care of. When she died he didn't even cry. Her body had no sooner been carried out of the house than he was phoning the insurance company. She had a thousand dollars of insurance and he buried her for six hundred.

"I hate him for that, all right. It's an awful thing to say, but I can't help it. If he was a decent man, I wouldn't want any part of what he has, but I guess now I've earned

it. Summers when the other girls were having fun, I was working in the hay. If I needed a new bra, I had to beg for it, and a dress was almost out of the question. So I'm going to ride the whole thing down to the end. I'm going to get what he has."

"Which is plenty."

"I'd settle for just the farm."

"So would I. Who wouldn't?"

She played with the front of her halter. Butch licked his lips and swallowed hard. He would be in for it if Billings came in without their hearing him, and although he could take Billings in a fight, he did not want that. Billings was too old to fight.

"We could sell the farm," Candy said.

"Well, we haven't got it yet, and from the way your uncle looks and acts, it's going to be a long time before he drops dead."

She lay back on the davenport and smiled at him.

"Butch, honey," she said.

"I'm listening."

"Do I have to ask you again, like I did down on the beach?"

"I'm thinking of your uncle."

"He's in town."

"We hope."

"And we're alone. Just the two of us. We may not get the same chance again right away. So why not make the most of it?"

He knew there was something wrong—that even if it was love, she was throwing herself at him too fast—but he didn't stop to think about it. He went over to her, putting the pail of water aside so he wouldn't upset it, and kissed her. He found her mouth hot and responding,

open wide, the sudden dart of her tongue making his head pound.

“Undress me,” she whispered.

She did not have to ask him twice.

CHAPTER VIII

THE RAIN stopped about four, and Jeff Lane came in a few minutes afterward. His shoes were covered with mud, and his clothes were soaking wet.

"That Mae is some girl," he said. "I go in the house and she's waiting for me in the sack."

"You're nuts."

"Maybe, but I can't help it. Anyway it's better than being married to some dame. I guess I was thinking about marrying Sherry before, but when she turned up the way she did, that ruined it."

"She's going to press you," Butch said. "She'll have a lawyer on your neck."

"I don't care."

"It could cost you."

"Well, I said I'd pay for an abortion, but she won't have one. I don't understand that. If I was a single girl and I was expecting, I'd want to get rid of it."

They went down to the barn to milk. Billings was there, and he was not cursing the way he generally did. He even nodded at them when they came in.

"Wait till you see the new cook," he said. He added, to Jeff, "Put out that cigarette. You know I don't allow no smoking in the barn. You want to burn me out of business?"

Jeff found a spot of bare concrete and stomped out the cigarette.

"What's she like?" he wanted to know.

"Young," said Billings.

"Pretty?"

"Damn right. And built. I go to her rooming house and she comes downstairs with her knockers bouncing. Not a big bounce but a little bounce. Right away I say to myself she's hired, even if she can't cook worth a damn." Billings scowled. "But you guys let her alone. I don't want you messing it up for me. Give me a week and we'll be sleeping together."

Butch went about his work while Billings kept talking about the new cook. She had arrived in a taxi just a few minutes before he had come down to the barn. She was busy getting supper. It did not matter to Butch. It simply meant they would get a decent meal for a change, and he could stand that. Soup was all right, but it did not stay with you like solid food.

"I ought to slap that Candy silly," Billings said when they were in the milk house. "The more I think of it, the more I know she was down to the lake with somebody, but she won't tell me who. I gave her a belt when I got back from town, and she just told me to go to hell. And after what I've done for her, bringing her up and all that. She's as bad as my sister was."

Butch left the barn with Jeff. They walked toward the house.

"I think Ed Fulton scored on that Candy," Jeff said.

"I doubt it."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I just doubt it."

"If it wasn't for the land, I'd give her a whirl. Fifty

a week you can earn on almost any farm, but the land you don't get hardly ever. We cut the wood over there every year and it'll soon be ready for clearing. I can rent a tractor and pull out the stumps."

Butch did not reply. Clearing land was tough work; sometimes it took years to do it. Still, a man could make progress if he threw himself into the job. Even if a man didn't farm, he could divide up the acres and sell lots. People were building in the country more and more. Any way he looked at it, getting an acre a year was a good bonus.

They washed in cold water, same as always, and sat around the living room, waiting for supper.

"Wish I could get the car again tonight," Jeff said.

"The old man might make an exception and let you."

"No, he wouldn't, but he'd let you. You could take me along and we'd pick up Mae. You could take us up to the park and after I'm done with her you can have her."

"No, thanks. I don't go for that sort of deal."

"Why not? You aren't first in a house, are you?"

"That's different. But I only went to a house once, and I didn't like it. It cost me five bucks, and the girl wasn't worth two."

"Suit yourself," Jeff said. "Hell, I wish I had a beer."

"Where's the nearest bar?"

"About a mile up the road. The farmers come in there and so do the girls. The girls are off the farms and they know what they were built for. Before I started going with Sherry, I went up there whenever I could. That's where I met Mae Collins, and I met some others, too. Good ones. For buying them a couple of beers, you can't beat it."

When they left the house, the sun was out and steam was rising from the ground. In a couple of days they would be back into the hay. Billings would be out to make up for lost time, and he would drive them hard.

When they entered the kitchen, Butch felt as if he had been hit by a giant fist. Lucy was at the stove, her face red from the heat.

"Meet Lucy," Billings said. "Lucy, the big one is Butch Hagen and the other one is Jeff Lane."

Butch mumbled something and sat down. It was plain that Billings knew nothing of his relationship with Lucy, and he let it stay that way.

He had been hungry, but he ate hardly anything. The food was good, but he couldn't eat. Why had she followed him? She had landed a job in that store, and that should have been enough. She couldn't be broke. He had given her most of his money.

He watched her as she ate, but she did not glance at him. Her dress was low in front, and he could see the tops of her white breasts.

"Maybe I could use the car," he said to Billings.

"You haven't been here very long."

"Well, I was just wondering."

"Why do you want it?"

"I need cigarettes, for one thing."

"There's a place with a machine up the road."

"I won't be gone long."

"All right, but don't hot-rod. You hot-rod that Ford and you'll never drive it again."

Candy called for food, but Billings refused to have any sent in to her.

"You tell me the truth about that night and you eat," he shouted. "Keep it to yourself and you starve."

"Oh, go to hell!"

Butch was glad to get out of there. He walked to the car. It was warmer now, but that wasn't the reason he was sweating.

The Ford started easily, and he drove down the lane. He didn't need cigarettes, but he had to think. Lucy's appearance at the farm had shaken him. What was going to come of this if she found out about him and Candy? Why couldn't she just let go of him instead of following him around this way?

He reached the highway and drove at thirty-five. He was in no hurry, and it was good to be driving a car again.

The neon lights of a bar appeared up ahead, and he pulled into the parking area. Only three other cars were there. He guessed that meant a slow night for the bar. It was not quite hot enough to drive people to beer.

The place was crowded enough inside, though, and he saw only one vacant stool at the bar, between a young girl and a man with gray hair. He squeezed in and sat down.

"Beer," he told the bartender.

"Any special brand?"

"Whatever you've got on tap."

The beer was cold. The girl next to him smelled fresh and clean. "You're new around here, aren't you?" she said. "Huh?"

He turned to look at her. She had a bright smile—white teeth behind red lips. The white blouse she wore was too tight for her and the cones of her breasts put a strain on the buttons.

"Yes, I'm almost new around here," he said. "I was here a few years ago but for some reason it didn't take."

"How big are you?"

"Six-six."

"And you work on a farm?"

"Friendly Farms."

"Then you know Jeff Lane?"

"Sure. I work with him."

"I'm Mae," the girl said. "Mae Collins."

He nodded and ordered another beer. Maybe she was too young, but he could understand why Jeff had gone off the deep end for her. She was the kind of a girl who knew how to excite a man, and she could be had.

"I'm broke," she said. "And I could use a beer."

"You look under age."

"That don't bother them none out here. If I've got the dime I get the beer, but I can't say my credit is any good."

He bought her a beer.

"Thanks. I like my men big, honey. The bigger they are, the more they send me into the clouds."

"Here's one guy who won't send you."

"You won't? Why not?"

"Because I hate jails. I spent the night in one once, for a fight, and that was enough for me."

"You don't have to worry about me none."

"I don't intend to."

He had a few beers with her, and she told him something about herself. Yes, she had run away with a man when she was fifteen, lying about her age, but it hadn't been much fun. The man had had some money, and then the money was gone. When they had picked her up, the authorities had threatened to send her to a home for wayward girls, but her father had fought that and won. As for the rest of it, she had quit school the previous

year and now she just hung around the house, doing the washing every Monday and the ironing the next day.

"Maybe I'll get married," she said.

"Would your father and mother consent to it?"

"Hell, they'd be glad to get rid of me. They keep saying all the time how I'm going to get myself pregnant and then I'll be in for it." She shrugged. "Maybe I should straighten out but I can't seem to do it. I like men and they like me." She laughed. "Did you hear me in Jeff's room the other night?"

"Yeah."

"He said you did but I don't care. I haven't got anything to hide."

Butch thought of taking her somewhere in the car, but decided against it. He had told Billings he would not be gone long, and, anyway, she was a tramp.

"You ought to leave Jeff alone," he said.

That made her angry. "It ain't none of your business, is it?"

"Only that I think you're both making a mistake."

"So what? It's our mistake."

"You'll make a real one some night."

"Sometimes I don't care if we do. He's got a steady job and he could support me. Besides, I like him better than the other fellows. Fellows my own age don't know very much. He does. The only thing is, he can't drink worth a darn. Give him a six-pack of beer and he's drunk. My old man can drink two or three six-packs and still know his way home."

He got change at the bar for cigarettes. On the way out he got a few packages from the machine.

It was dark outside now, and after he started the car, he turned on the lights. Somehow he did not feel like

going back to the farm. He felt like driving the car as far as it would go and leaving it. But of course that would be crazy. He could go on working at the farm, making love to Candy when he got the chance, and Lucy would only be around for a couple of weeks. Then Lucy would drift on and he would forget about her, and things would be all right. If Billings should die, Candy would be in clover and he would be in it right along with her. If Billings died. . . . That was the hitch. Some of these rugged farmers lived to be eighty.

When he reached the lane, he turned in, drove up to the back of the house and parked. He heard the voice almost as soon as he stopped the motor and began rolling up the window.

“Oh, Butch.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m here.”

“I know. You think I’m deaf or something?”

“Can I talk to you?”

“I can’t stop you from doing that.”

He stretched his legs as Lucy came around the car and got in beside him. Like the girl in the bar, she smelled fresh and clean.

“You could kiss me,” she said.

He did not move. If he kissed her they might go the rest of the way, Candy or no Candy, and he was not prepared for that.

“Why did you take that job?” he asked.

“To be near you, honey. I didn’t realize how much I missed you until you weren’t there with me. Last night I woke up crying, and this morning I saw the ad in the paper. Mr. Billings came in to see me, and I didn’t want

him to know we had been friendly. I thought he might not hire me if I told him."

"This job won't last long, and there goes your job in the store."

"The store? I'm not worried about that. There are other jobs, and I don't think I would have liked that one anyway. Besides, I don't want to stay here. I want us to move on. You can get something in a big city and so can I. The big cities are the place, Butch. And we could get a furnished apartment."

"You know how I feel about farming."

"And you know how I feel. What can you get out of it? Years of hard work and nothing to show for what you've done. Are you willing to settle for that?"

He stretched his legs again.

"Maybe I like it here," he said.

"Because of that blonde?"

"I didn't say that."

"She's pretty, isn't she?"

"I'd say so."

"She could earn a fortune with the shape she's got. Tonight she wanted a robe, and when I came downstairs with it she was undressed. A girl can't compete with something like that."

"You've got me all wrong," Butch said. "Sure, she's pretty, but that doesn't mean I've got anything on my mind about her."

"She's hiding something from her uncle, Butch."

"Maybe she is."

"I can tell. She didn't go swimming alone that night, and Mr. Billings just wants her to do what's right."

"That's no excuse for starving her."

"Well, you have to look at it from his angle, too. He

brought her up and he's given her a home. He doesn't want her running around, and you can't blame him for that. Sometimes people have to be forced to do what they should do. Personally, I like Mr. Billings."

"I think he stinks as a man."

"Then why work for him?"

"Because of the pay. Fifty a week is okay and it's steady. Then you get land every year, an acre. In ten years I could have ten acres and I could go into something for myself. You get money for the wood you sell, and even if I didn't go in for cows, I could raise chickens. It would be tough to have to buy your feed, but if others have done it I guess I could. Then you can start an egg route in town and sell from door to door. You get more than the market price that way, and it helps out."

She was silent a moment. As she crossed her legs he could hear the sound of her nylons, and he knew how they would be up high on her thighs, the garter belt straining to keep them in place.

"You really like farming, don't you, Butch?"

"It's honest work."

"There's other work that's honest."

"What else am I fitted for? Without a high-school education you're sunk."

"You could drive a truck."

"Yeah, I could do that."

"They say truck drivers make out pretty good. You get into the union, and you get paid more. It wouldn't be like it was with the carnival." She inhaled unevenly. "I wish you could see it, Butch. The farm isn't the answer, not this farm. There's a lot wrong here—I can feel it. Tonight I'm doing the dishes and Mr. Billings comes up behind me, sort of touching me. It made me jump and

I told him not to do it. Then he said there was a movie in town and why didn't we go. I didn't think it would be right for me to go with him, and anyway, I wanted to see you."

"You've seen me," Butch said.

"You don't have to talk to me that way, Butch."

"Go on and go to the movies with him."

"Maybe I will," she flared suddenly. "Maybe I will do just that."

"He'll get you up in the woods."

"No, he won't."

"That's what you think. You see if he doesn't. He'll get you up in the woods and you'll have another man in your life. Like I say, go ahead. Probably you could marry the guy and get everything he's got."

She was crying softly now.

"I don't want to marry anybody except you," she wailed. "I want you in a decent job and I want you to be happy and then I want your babies."

"Cut it out," he said harshly.

A sob caught in her throat. She leaned against him. "Don't you love me, Butch?"

"That was for the road," he said. "We were both lonesome, and it was better being together than on our own. We had some good times together, but that's all it was." He touched her, felt the bra under her dress, the one with the stitched cups. "Let's go up to my room."

"No," she said.

"There's no harm in it."

"Right now I'd feel cheap if I did, and Mr. Billings might miss me. Being out only a few minutes, I can say I was getting the air or going for a walk."

"They say he sleeps soundly."

"Who said? Candy?"

"Well—"

"You have changed, Butch. You've changed fast. Either you were lying to me before or you didn't know the truth. And I think it's that Candy. When I mentioned your name, she didn't say anything, but she talked about the other man all right, about how he has a girl and sleeps with her."

Butch took his hand away.

"You might as well quit your job here," he said.

"And do what?"

"Go with the store if you can. This is only for a couple of weeks."

She was silent a moment. "I'll stay and see what happens," she said finally. "You've gone blind, Butch, and I want to help you if I can." She opened the car door. "Good night."

CHAPTER IX

IT WAS too wet to work in the hay the next day, and Billings put him to work on the '52 Ford while he sent Jeff Lane out to cut more wood.

"I don't want the help driving my good car," Billings said. "You guys would ruin it."

"That other thing is a stone crusher," Jeff Lane said as he got ready to leave.

"What's the matter, isn't it good enough for you?"

"Girls don't go for an old car."

"No? From what I hear, you've got all the girls you need." Billings laughed. "Maybe one too many, huh?"

Lucy left the kitchen to do the upstairs work, and Jeff went on outside. Butch sat at the table, finishing his coffee.

"What do you think of our new cook?" Billings wanted to know.

"She's okay," Butch said.

"Nice shape."

"Yeah."

"Imagine an old man like me jazzing that? She'd think she got caught in the dark with my bull."

"She might have something to say about that."

"Oh, I don't know. She's friendly enough and she seems to like me. I gave her a little pat last night, too

soon, maybe, and she didn't go for that, but she didn't get mad either. And tonight there's a good movie on. You like westerns?"

"Not much. They're all the same."

"This one isn't. This is about how they built the railroad west and all that. It took guts in those days, Hagen. You don't find that kind of guts today. Today people want the government to support them. Like some of the farmers out west who get paid to plow under. That doesn't make any sense to me. Same as paying me not to have my cows milked, letting the damn things die."

Candy called in for coffee or a glass of water, but he wouldn't let her have any.

"You tell me the truth and you get eats," he shouted. "I want to know the name of the guy. I want to know what went on, you bitch."

Butch pushed his cup aside trying to control his anger. What if Candy had got hers down there by the lake? She was old enough to know what she wanted, wasn't she? Silently he envied the bus driver for that first time—her books probably scattered on the floor and her dress up to her hips, the pain of it making her cry out and then the fury of desire claiming her. . . .

"Maybe Lucy and I'll take in the movies tonight," Billings said. "She said she'd think about it."

"All right."

"I said if she wanted her job she ought to agree."

"That's one way of doing it."

"And I've got a job for you to do, if we do go. You stay here in the house and make sure Candy doesn't get anything to eat or drink. And you stay out here in the kitchen. You don't go in there where she is unless I'm around. I'd ask Jeff to do it but I don't trust him."

Butch felt his spirits lift. "I'll need money to pick up the starter if I'm going to fix the car," he said.

"Well, I'll give you ten. Bring me the change, you hear?"

"Couldn't I have it as an advance on my pay? I'm almost flat."

"I don't like to advance anything."

"Okay."

"But this time I'll do it. You get a bill for the starter and the rest comes out of your pay. I'd go in myself, but I want to hang around this cook. She drifted into town with some guy she won't talk much about, and that means she isn't so innocent. I may even get what I want before you get back. If I do, there won't be any movies. I've got a soft bed and I haven't been sleeping this long alone and liking it."

Butch picked up the ten and went outside. The sun was bright and hot, drying the grass as he got into the Ford. He thought of Jeff working in the woods, and felt sorry for him. The flies would be bad and he would sweat like a pig. Summer was no time to cut wood. Around deer season was best, when the sap was down. A man could cut faster in cold weather, and he didn't have to worry about snakes.

He rolled the windows down and drove toward the highway. He felt all mixed up inside. Maybe he was calling it off with Lucy, or her with him, but he did not want Billings to have her. He had started out by thinking Billings did not stand a chance with her, but now he was not so sure. A girl hurt by one man was apt to turn to another, and then on top of that, maybe Billings' money would be enough to turn the trick.

About a mile down the road he saw a girl walking,

dressed in shorts and halter. He slowed down and stopped beside her. The girl was Mae Collins.

"Thanks," she said as she got into the car. "I was close to burning up in that sun."

"You going to town?"

"A man wants to see me."

"That figures."

"He's up here for the summer, and he's an artist. I met him in the bar after you left last night, and he wants a girl to pose in the raw. I figure I can pick up a few bucks and not do anything that I'm not doing already."

"He pay well?"

"He didn't say, but I suppose he does. Anyway, it'll be more than I get on the farm. All I get on the farm is the hired man and I'm tired of him."

"What about Jeff Lane?"

"Jeff is sweet enough, but he's like all the others. Three beers and he's ready to go to town." She pulled her shorts up higher on her thighs. "You missed out last night, big boy. I was willing if you were."

"I know."

"But it worked out okay. This artist guy came in and he started asking around. He had another girl, but she quit to get married, and he needed somebody right away. And it isn't hard work, not from what he said. You don't have to pose all day long. He takes pictures of you first and then he paints from that."

"That's dangerous, Mae."

"Why?"

"Because he could have prints made of the pictures and sell them. You hit any big town and you'll find a place or so that sells nude photos in sets. He could be playing you for a sucker."

"Stop being such a wet blanket."

"I'm not. I'm just warning you. Lots of girls have been fooled that way."

Mae adjusted her halter, fluffed out her hair.

"I'll worry about that later," she said. "And I wouldn't care anyhow. He can sell the old pictures if he wants to. It's no skin off my nose. When we had a boarder last year, some guy who was in a wheel chair, he used to pay a buck if I'd undress and let him look. I made a buck almost every day for a week, and then the old man caught us and broke it up. He called me a whore and kicked the boarder out."

Butch lit a cigarette and watched the highway. Mae was a lost soul, and there was no mistake about that.

"You belong in a carnival," he said.

"Doing what, for pete's sake?"

"Working in a girlie show. You've got a good shape and you wouldn't mind stripping."

"They pay good?"

"Fair."

She took the cigarette from him and filled her lungs with smoke.

"I might think about it," she said.

The town lay ahead, and Butch could smell the river past the row of trees. Jeff had said the fishing in the river was good. When he got a chance, he would have to try it. He had not fished in years; it was a restful way of passing the time. The last time out he had gone with a girl, but they had not fished much.

"I like new cars," Ma Collins said.

"Who doesn't?"

"We've only got an old truck."

"That's the way it goes."

"The old man hauls manure in it and then he hauls groceries. You think that's right?"

"Wouldn't seem to be."

"And in the fall he butchers the pigs. Last year he killed three and they all spoiled, because the freezer broke down and he couldn't afford to get it fixed. Can you blame me for wanting to get away from there? The ceiling in my room leaks—when it rains, I get a bath. Last night I had to sleep on the sofa, the bed was so wet. And he can't get a loan. Nobody will loan him. Give the house another five years and it'll be on the ground."

He was silent.

"I'll be up at the bar tonight," she said.

"I won't."

"Tell Jeff for me, will you?"

"All right."

"If I don't find somebody else first, he's got it made. There's Grange tonight and the folks won't be home."

"What about the hired man?"

"He can go to hell. What do you think I was doing in the living room at four o'clock this morning? Counting my money? He comes in, drunk and smelling of beer and wakes me up."

Butch let her out near the center of town and drove on to the junk yard.

"You should have brought in the old starter," the man in the yard told him. "This way it costs you five bucks. With the old starter it would have been three."

"I'll bring it in the next time and get my two bucks."

"Nope. We don't do business that way."

He paid the man, got a receipt, and put the starter in the trunk.

He rode around, looking over the bars in town. He

had time and he could use a beer. He spotted Sherry's car parked near one of the bars, and pulled over to the curb. He did not like to drink alone.

He found her at the bar, and sat down next to her.

"Thought you didn't have any money," he said, looking at the double shot in front of her.

"I cashed a check in the grocery store."

"But that takes money, too. A check gets to your bank and then what do you do?"

"I let them worry. I can get money. I can get a loan on my car. The man at the finance company said I could. But he said I had to get somebody with a steady job to sign for me. They don't call putting on parties a steady job. How nuts can they get?"

He ordered a beer and a double shot for her.

"What about Jeff?"

"I wouldn't ask him to sign anything. He wouldn't help me before, so why would he help me now? I was thinking you might do it, Butch."

Butch shook his head. "I'm new around here, and you know how they are about farm help. I couldn't do you any good on a loan, Sherry."

"Well. I've got to do something. Once I'm back to work, I'll really knock myself out. The girl in Newton quit, and I can do some work over there. That's a bigger place and I ought to do good. Half of what I make I'll put away for the baby. Then when it's due, I'll take a trip to another town, and when I come back I'll say my husband died. Nobody has to know, and I won't have to tell the kid. Fathers and husbands die. It happens every day." She blinked the gathering tears from her eyes. "But I wish it was different with me and Jeff. He hadn't ought to get off without anything."

"I've got to go," he said, getting up.

"You busy or something?"

"Billings would like to keep me that way."

She made a face. "He's a pig. When I was snowed in out there last winter, he tried to make up to me, saying he could give Jeff a raise if I was nice to him, but I wouldn't have anything to do with the slob. If he's got the urge that bad he can always find somebody. That Mae Collins would hit the bed with him for a five-dollar bill."

"I'll see you," Butch said.

"Most likely I'll be drunk."

"You will be, if you keep this up."

"It helps me forget. Is that bad? I get my brains scrambled up with the liquor and I can almost tell myself that things are going to be okay. Joke. Big joke. Want a laugh? About seven months will make it all right. Seven months from now I'll be a mother and then the fun starts. I hope Jeff is satisfied."

Butch left the bar. It was really hot now. Instead of working in the woods, Jeff should be whacking down the hay, but then maybe it wasn't dry enough underneath. Billings had cared for his fields, plowing and seeding every few years, and the hay was thick. That was one of the ways Billings was smart.

Taking the road out of town, he goosed the Ford, belting her up to sixty, then dropping back to thirty. A car like this Ford was meant to wallop the road, but it wasn't his right to do it. Billings would probably keep it four or five years and then curse the salesman because the trade-in allowance was so low. If Butch had the money, and the car, he would swap every two years.

You saved on repairs that way, not to mention tires, and you got the best out of the automobile.

As soon as he reached the farm, he went to work on the starter. It was not an easy job—something was wrong with the threads on one of the bolts—but he finally got it in place and then put the covering over the flywheel.

“You about done?” Billings wanted to know.

He was under the car and he couldn’t see Billings, just the man’s feet and part of his legs when he turned his head.

“Almost.”

“How much was the starter?”

“Five.”

“You get a receipt?”

“It’s in my pocket.”

“How come this wreck starts so hard in cold weather?”

“Plugs. Points. Coil. There are lots of reasons.”

“Check them out while you’re at it.”

“What do I make the tests with?”

“You’ve got eyes, haven’t you?”

“Whatever you say.” What was the use of fighting about it? “I’ll do as much as I can. First I want to find out if she’ll start.”

He crawled out from under the car and stood up, looking down at Billings. Billings was stripped to the waist, and for the first time Butch noticed a scar where the older man had either had an injury or an operation. Maybe it had been a rupture—a lot of farmers got them, lifting too much alone and not waiting for help.

“I’d like to pound that new cook,” Billings said. He blew his nose with a dirty handkerchief. “I could pound that until I went out of my mind.”

“Don’t tell me,” Butch said. “Ask her.”

"Maybe I'll keep her on as a housekeeper until I can make up my mind."

"What would Candy do then?"

"Work in the fields this time of the year, and shovel snow and take care of the cows in the winter. If I bore down on her I could make her do a man's work."

"As if you haven't."

The old man's face hardened. "It's no affair of yours what I do to her."

"I'll buy that."

"And you stay with her tonight. See that she doesn't get anything to eat or drink. There's beer in the kitchen and you can have some of that. Not that you haven't already. I can smell it. I don't go for drinking on the job. You'll get a few belts into your belly one of these days and when you back up to the barn with the tractor and trailer you'll drive me right through it."

"You shouldn't stand where you do."

"Who's running this farm?"

"But there's no need for it. I know how far to go and when to stop. I've seen the gas lever on a tractor get stuck, and that'd wipe you out."

"I'm pretty fast when I have to be, Hagen."

"So is a tractor that's gone crazy."

The older man's giant chest was covered with sweat.

"See if this car starts."

"That's what I was going to do."

He got in and tried the starter. The motor popped right off, but it did not run smoothly. That could be anything from a bad crankshaft to an inferior plug. Of course the carb was the first place to start, and you went on from there.

Billings wandered off and Butch went to work on the

car, cutting down the idle of the carb and then giving it more air. The motor smoothed out somewhat, and he turned off the switch. Checking the plugs, he found they were in terrible shape, one coated with oil, and he cleaned them up as best he could. He was almost done when Lucy came out of the house. He watched her as she approached. She had put on a bathing suit. He had not seen the suit before, and she looked fine in it.

"You're all dirty," she said.

"Can't help it."

"I'm going swimming."

"So I see."

"Mr. Billings said I could. He's in the house with Candy, and she can't get at anything."

"Why don't you give her something to eat when he isn't looking?"

"Because he hired me to do a job and I'm doing it. She could make it easy on herself and be honest with him."

"What is this, the Dark Ages?"

"Don't ask me." Her face was serious. "I'm going with him to the movies tonight."

"So I understand."

"You jealous?"

"You're your own boss."

"Is that all you can say?"

"What else is there to say? You're lying down in a bed of roses and you're going to get stuck by a thorn. He isn't taking you to the movies for the hell of it. After the movies there'll be something else."

"I asked him about that, and he promised me that was all he wanted. He says he's lonely, that Candy was never a companion to him."

"His story."

"I'll buy it until a better one comes along. Why should I doubt him?"

"Buy it and you'll pay for it."

"You didn't. You had me for free."

"Shut up and take your swim. I suppose I've got to go up to the woods to finish the afternoon."

She moved away from him, and he felt a sinking sensation. He did not know why he should feel that way. She was on her own and so was he. That was the way he wanted it.

CHAPTER X

HE FOUND Jeff Lane taking it easy on a stump. The saw lay on the ground.

"You look busy," Butch said.

"Busy doing nothing, but this is the only way to get ahead of Billings. He can't hear the saw from the house or the barn."

"Just the same—"

"You have to wise up, fellow. Last winter when the oil burner went out for the night, he made me stay up until morning to put wood on the fireplace in the living room—and I had to work the next day. He didn't even say thanks. He just said it wasn't warm enough in the house and what was I doing with my time. That's appreciation for you."

Butch nodded and sat down on the ground. The flies were bad and the heat in the woods was worse, the kind of heat that burned right through a man. Out in the fields there would be a slight breeze, but here in the woods there was none.

"I met that Mae," Butch said. "I met her last night and then again today. She said she'd be up at the bar tonight."

"You make any time with her?"

"I'm not that dumb."

"Why not? Everybody scores. She couldn't count high enough to add up the men she's been with. So she's safe. A girl like that never knows who nails her."

"Sherry knows," Butch said.

"I'm done with her."

"Why?"

"I don't know. She cries a lot, and that makes me feel bad. Funny how a thing like that made me cold on her, isn't it? Before, it was all right. It was real fine. She'd come out here at night and we'd go to town. On my day off I'd sneak up to her room in Parkstown, and I didn't get out of bed until it was time to come back to the farm."

At three-thirty they went to work and cut a few trees, just in case Billings came out there later to see what had been done. All they did was to cut the trees down. They did not do any trimming. An axe was better than a saw for the small limbs, anyway.

They were late for milking, and Billings was sore.

"Anybody who gets fifty bucks a week ought to be able to tell time," he shouted. "You think I pay you guys so I can do the milking by myself?"

Jeff had forgotten to put out his cigarette, and that caused more trouble. Well, Billings was right there—a barn was no place to smoke. Once Butch had worked for a farmer who had insisted on smoking upstairs in the mow, and one night that barn had burned to the ground, taking the house and outbuildings with it. The farmer had been wiped out, and there had not been enough insurance to cover the loss. It was the only job Butch had left without his pay. He had felt too sorry for the guy even to ask for it.

"You see that cook in a bathing suit?" Billings wanted to know.

"I saw her," Butch said.

"Some shape, huh?"

"Not bad."

"Better than Candy. Candy's too big upstairs. She reminds me of one of these cows here in the barn. Take her when she gets to be fifty and she'll flop all over the place. I ought to know. My wife was big that way. Give me some dame who's going to keep her shape."

They finished with the milking and went to wash. After Butch was done at the sink, he changed into fresh clothes. If he was going to sit up at the house with Candy, he wanted to look decent.

"The old man's going to get at the cook tonight," Jeff said as Butch came downstairs.

"Maybe she isn't that kind."

"Any girl is that kind."

They went up to the house for supper. Billings had washed and changed his clothes, and didn't look too bad. The food was on the table. It smelled good. Butch wondered where and when Lucy had learned to cook, but he guessed there were a lot of things he didn't know about her.

"I hope you like it," Lucy said as they sat down. "But the beef seems to be tough."

"I don't buy top grade," Billings said. "Why waste money when you've got teeth to chew with? Last year one of the cows died and we ate some of that. People at the Grange told me we'd get sick but we didn't. Which goes to prove that most people don't know what they're talking about."

"That smells good," Candy called from the living room. "It smells real good."

"You know how to get some," Billings said. "Level with me or go hungry."

"You want me to make up a lie?"

"No, I want the truth. I want to know who the man was."

"There wasn't any man."

"I think different."

"Thanks, Uncle Clay. Thanks for nothing."

"She's going to starve," Butch said, unable to fight down his anger.

Billings shrugged. "So she'll starve. The choice is hers. She went down to that lake with a man and I want to know who it was. I'm not keeping any slut around here, and don't you forget it."

Jeff was the first one away from the table. "I'm going up to the bar for some beer," he said.

"You've been getting out a lot lately," Billings said.

"What else is there to do?"

"Where's your girl?"

"We broke up."

"Just as well," Billings said. "A man can't work and be tied up with a woman."

After supper, Billings went out to the barn to check on a cow that seemed off her feed. Lucy cleared the table, began doing the dishes.

"You could help me," she said to Butch. "We want to make the first show."

"Give me a towel."

She washed and he dried. Once in a while their bodies touched. She paid no attention to him, and when he had

the urge to kiss her on the back of the neck, he restrained himself.

"The lake is nice," she said after a while.

"It adds to the value of the farm."

"Does it?"

"Well, sure. If a city person bought the place, they'd probably use the lake as a base and start a resort. That's what's happening to a lot of farms. Summer hotels are built on the land, or some rich guy buys it for a toy and lets it go to hell."

She wrung out the sponge she'd been using.

"Do you ever miss the carnival, Butch?"

"A little. It was fun seeing different places, but that's all. Here the work is steady and I know I'm going to have a job the year around. And I don't have to worry about a semi breaking down with me on the road and not having any money or credit. Even the tires on that rig were shot. Whoever got it didn't get much."

Lucy went upstairs to change, and he sat down at the kitchen table. He was still there when Billings came in from the barn.

"The cow's all right," Billings said.

"That's good."

"I think she just needs the bull."

"Maybe."

"She didn't catch, the last time."

"Sometimes they don't."

Billings sat down at the table.

"What am I supposed to do while you're gone?" Butch asked.

"Stay out here in the kitchen, and if Candy tries to get anything to eat, kick her in the face. Or somewhere else. I don't care what you do. And don't go in there."

We won't be late. There's beer in the refrigerator. Try anything you shouldn't, and you'll be looking down the barrel of a rifle. Got me?"

"Yeah."

Lucy came down in a black dress that made her look as if she had been poured into it, a dress that went with her long black hair. Butch remembered her buying the dress outside of Philly, at a sale, and later how he had helped her out of it. . . .

"I'm ready," she said. She glanced at Billings. "If you are."

He grinned. "You don't know how ready I am."

"If you mean what I think you mean, you're on the wrong road."

"Then I'll let it drop. I'm a patient man—I can wait."

They went out, Billings holding the door for her. Butch walked over to the window to watch them. Her hips swayed as she moved toward the car. Billings stayed behind her, probably so he could get a good look. That was one thing about Lucy, her walk. Even in a cheap girlie tent and without trying, her walk had been sexy.

Billings hurried to open the car door for her. Her nylons were pale in the late sun as she got in, the seams of the stockings straight and dark. She was always particular about the seams, having them just right.

The car moved off. Butch turned away from the window. Lucy was asking for trouble by going out with Billings, but he could not do anything about it. And he could not have her coming to his room, even if he felt like it. Billings would be jealous. That could be the end of his job at Friendly Farms, and he did not want it to end—not yet.

"Baby," he said as he entered the living room, "What is that guy doing to you?"

"Almost everything he can."

She lay on the davenport. Her robe had fallen apart; and he could see her long, perfectly formed legs. She smiled up at him as he bent to kiss her; then her arms went around his neck, pulling him close. Her lips were warm and wet, and the kiss was a lingering one. He ran one hand down the front of her robe and found her all naked and alive.

"You've got to have something to eat," he said.

"He might miss it."

"I don't care if he does. A person has to eat. And I could say I had a sandwich. I guess he wouldn't mind that none."

It only took a few minutes to fix her something. She sat up to eat, with her robe falling wider apart than ever.

"He punched me," she said.

"Where?"

"In the chest."

"A man shouldn't do that to a girl."

"He isn't a man—you ought to know that by now. You find animals like him in the jungle." She swallowed. "And even the jungle wouldn't want him. The animals would kick him out."

"He's got it in for you, all right."

She nodded. "It's always been this way, Butch. I only had a few friends in school, and they could never come here. I had a birthday party once, fixed for me by my aunt, and he chased all the kids away even before they had their ice cream."

"Why didn't your aunt say something?"

"She couldn't. She was afraid of him. He never spoke

to her without cursing. He said she was barren, but I didn't know what that meant at the time. And he had his women on the side. One of them lived with her husband in the house where you live now, and when the man was out in the fields, my uncle was with the wife. I had to call him to the telephone one day and I caught them in the living room. By that time I was older, and I knew what they were doing. The woman was crying that she didn't want to, but he was doing it anyway. Later they moved away in the middle of the night."

"He's got the hots for the new girl," Butch said.

"Lucy?"

"There's only one."

"She's all right, but she sides with him. I told her to be careful of him, but she wouldn't listen to me. She said if I had done something wrong I should confess it. Know what would happen then? He'd be after you with a gun."

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "You want a beer?"

"A beer would taste good."

He got a couple of beers and then sat down beside her. He wanted her badly, but there was no hurry. The movies would last a couple of hours, not counting the driving time, and a little waiting made it all the better.

"We ought to get out of here," Butch said. "Tonight."

"You know how I feel about that."

"I know, but your uncle could go off the deep end any day. What would you do if he really tore into you? You wouldn't have a chance."

"He wouldn't do anything like that."

"Don't be too sure. Even if he didn't kill you, he might injure you for keeps."

She put the plate down.

"I want this farm," she said. "I want it to be all mine." She leaned toward him. "And you're in on it, too, Butch. Yours and mine."

"What if he got married again? You wouldn't have any claim. And even if he just lived with a woman, the woman would probably have some rights. I don't know the law on that, but I've heard of those things."

"He isn't going to get married and he isn't going to live with anybody."

"Tell me how you can stop him."

"I'm thinking about it. I could pump a bullet into him and say he tried to molest me."

"But that would be murder."

"If you saw a snake would you kill it, or walk around the thing?"

"That depends on what kind of a snake it was. Some snakes don't do any harm."

"Well, all right, but he's worse than a snake."

"Too bad we went down to the lake that night."

"I'm not sorry."

He got some more beer from the refrigerator, and thought about it. Killing Billings wouldn't be like killing an ordinary man. But she would be taking a long chance. The state might say she had killed him for his land and money. Others had tried murder and failed. What made her think she would be lucky?

"Let's forget about your uncle and his land," he said when he returned to the living room. "The old Ford is running and since it's in your name you've got a right to take it. We can hit the farms further north, and I'll get some job that has a house to go with it. Or say it was only a room where we could be together, taking our

meals with the family, and we wouldn't be missing anything."

"Until I got pregnant," she said. "What would we do then?"

"Take things as they come. There's always a way, if you try hard enough to find it. Or I could boot a truck around for some trucking company. Only I like the farm life better. It's healthy and you can get ahead if you work at it real hard. I worked on farms where the help was satisfied. Every farmer isn't like your uncle. You get a day off every week and if there's a garden, you get some of your eats from that. It could be worse. And we'd be together. This way we hardly ever see each other, and as soon as you get around again, he's going to be watching you. If you take a deep breath he'll know about it."

She put her head against his shoulder. "Don't you love me, Butch?"

"You know I do."

"And don't you think I have a right to the farm?"

"I'd say you have every right in the world."

"If we had it, we wouldn't have to worry about anything."

"Not much, anyway."

"And you want to leave all this behind us?"

"It was a thought. I want to be with you. I want to put a ring on your finger and give you my child."

"Maybe you have already."

"If I did, and we never got married, the baby would be a bastard—like me."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I am, or I think I am. My mother didn't want me—she left me on a porch. I don't even know my right name."

"I'd never do that to a baby of mine. Anybody who leaves a baby on a porch isn't much. I'm sorry to have to say that because she was your mother, but it's true. What can a little baby do to help himself? Nothing. Nothing at all. He's at the mercy of the world. But I shouldn't talk. My mother wasn't any good, either. She was pregnant with me when she married my father, and she was pregnant by another man when he killed her. Then I came with my uncle and it's been hell ever since. Once I wanted to run away but I couldn't do it. I only got as far as the lake and I turned back. I made up my mind that day that I was going to get the farm for myself. I—"

Butch kissed her, forcing her head back. Then he unbelted her robe and pulled it all the way open. The light from the end table spilled over the milky globes of her breasts. He stroked her lovely body, and she strained to meet him. Her breath was irregular and rapid, her breasts heaving, and this time when he kissed her she bit his lower lip. He could taste the blood. Panting, he drew her to him, his head pounding, and when she cried out, it was wonderful—like nothing he had ever experienced with a woman before.

"I could use another beer," she said afterward. "I'm done in."

He fixed his clothes and then got the beer. The beer was the same as the other had been, but it tasted better. He liked looking at her, half naked and satisfied, her face flushed by the fury of what had happened between them. He thought of being married to her, of owning her every night, as much as he could, and the thought made him happy.

“I’d better get these beer cans out into the kitchen,” he said after a long time. “And wash the plate.”

He put the beer cans in the trash container and washed the plate, dried it and put it away. The meat and bread would not be missed. At least she had had something to eat. But how much longer could they go on like this?

CHAPTER XI

BUTCH HAD not expected the attack, and he was not prepared to defend himself. One second he had his back to Billings, and the next second he was down on the barn floor, the cement hard against his knees, his head full of pain.

"Hell," he said, and rolled over.

Billings stood above him with the staff that was used to handle the bull. There was a terrible look on the old man's face.

"I ought to beat your brains in," Billings said.

"You almost did. What was that for?"

"For last night."

"I didn't do anything last night," he said, getting to his feet.

He could have hit Billings, staff or no staff—he could rip him apart, but he was ashamed to fight with a man that age.

"You gave Candy some beer. I could smell it on her breath."

"That any reason to club me?"

"You need to be taught a lesson."

"She was thirsty."

"That's the way I want her to be. Thirsty and hungry. Maybe she'll tell me the truth."

"I think what you're doing is against the law. Something to do with health and safety."

Billings waved the staff.

"Damn you, I'm the boss around here. She's my ward and if I want to kick her in the belly, I'll go ahead and do it. So I roughed her up last night. I trusted you, Hagen, and you let me down." Billings squinted. "You do anything else with her?"

"You're having nightmares," Butch said. "They'll get the best of you yet."

"I shouldn't have left you alone with her. I should have known better, but I wanted to date up that Lucy. Waste of time, too. You couldn't get her into the back seat of a car with a crowbar."

"What do you expect on the first date?" He rubbed the sore spot on his head.

"Next time I'll get her drunk."

"Okay."

"But not too drunk. I don't like them when they're too drunk. The last one was a drunk, and she didn't know what was happening to her. The next day she didn't remember nothing."

Jeff had been busy at the other end of the barn. He came past them on his way outside.

"What happens now?" Butch wanted to know.

"You stay until the hay is done, then you're through. I don't want men who won't obey me. I'd let you go now, but I need you, and good help are hard to come by during the season. In the fall I'll get an older man that can be trusted. You young guys have only got one thing on your minds."

Butch left him and went to finish the chores. He kept rubbing his head as he worked. The blow had been a

hard one—it could have done severe damage. He guessed maybe he had a hard head.

“The old man sore at you?” Jeff wanted to know when he entered their quarters.

“Plenty.”

“I heard some of it. You give her some beer like he said?”

“Yeah.”

Jeff laughed. “You give her something else?”

“What do I look like?”

“A guy who could go for a dame with a build.” Jeff stretched. “I wish I didn’t have to work. Work is hell. Think of all the people in this country who don’t have to work. And no matter how much you work, you don’t get ahead.”

“You won’t hanging around in a bar.”

Jeff beamed. “You know something? That was all right last night. Mae was up there, and she was walking on one leg when I blew in. I got a quart of beer and we went off in the woods. She’s got a place that she knows about—the grass is nice and soft. The only thing is, we lost her panties and she had to go home without them.”

“That guy at the bar is going to get into trouble, selling her drinks.”

“How?”

“The law says you have to be twenty-one in New Jersey.”

“He wants the bucks. All the girls from around here go up there. Last night I could have scored with a cute trick who lives on a pig farm. She was there with some jerk from town who couldn’t take it. He went to sleep in a booth, and she made the rounds of the guys at the bar. When Mae and me came out of the woods, she was

just getting into a car with a married farmer—and they weren't getting into the front seat."

They went up to breakfast, and it was excellent. The bacon was just crisp enough and the scrambled eggs soft. Butch had toast with his coffee, lit a cigarette.

"We've got to hump ourselves," Billings said. "Jeff, you cut in the next field and, Hagen, you bale with the second tractor. I'll be up here at the house, but I'll help you when you pull in at the barn. Don't back up until I get there to guide you."

"I can back it up all right," Butch said.

"Who's running this farm?"

"You are."

"All right. Just remember that. I had a guy slam the barn once and it cost me money to get it fixed."

About ten that morning Butch was able to bale, and he did not have much trouble with the machine. The wire broke a couple of times, but that was all. It was not hard to fix, and he felt good as the sun burned down on him. The hay was not the best, because of the rain, but it had not been ruined. Billings was lucky.

He had not brought any lunch with him—maybe Lucy did not know about putting up lunches for the field hands—but he did not care about that. He was thinking of the night before and how good it had been to be with Candy. Of course, the beer had been a mistake. He should have realized it, or found a piece of gum for her to chew. He just hoped Billings had not hurt her too much.

At two he got up to the barn with a load of hay, and Billings came running out of the house. He stood behind the trailer, up against the barn, and shouted and waved his arms. Butch grinned. One shot of the gas, one quick

lurch, and he could drive Billings right through the side of the barn. It would be an accident.

"Hold it," Billings yelled.

Butch cut the motor back to idle. He could not kill Billings. When he got right down to it, he could not kill anybody, no matter how much it meant.

Getting the bales off was not so bad. Billings helped him.

"I'll have a sandwich sent out to you," Billings said.

"All right."

"You stay out of the house when I'm not home."

"You're home now."

"I won't be. With Candy laid up, I've got to get the groceries from town. I'll drive down there as soon as we're through with this." Billings laughed. "I tried to get that Lucy to go in with me but she wouldn't. Said she had too much to do."

When the load was off, Billings walked up to the house. Butch sat down in the shade, his back against the barn. He was still sitting there when Billings drove away. A couple of minutes later, Lucy came out with a plate. Because of the heat she had changed into shorts and a halter. He admired her legs as she came toward him.

"Beef again," she said as she leaned down to give him the plate. "Beef with some lettuce. I remembered that you like lettuce."

"It's okay."

"You're soaked with sweat."

"It's hot down in the field. That sun is really cooking."

"And yet you like it."

He took a bite of the sandwich. "It's a living," he said and tried to chew the beef.

"I understand you won't be here much longer."

"That's what I was told—after the old bastard clubbed me over the head."

"What will you do then?"

"There are other farms."

She sat down beside him and stretched her legs out, but he was not looking at her legs. The halter fit loosely, and it hung open up at the top. He could see the upper curves of her breasts.

"You should have left that girl alone last night," she said.

"Yeah."

"And I'll bet there was more to it than just the beer. She's that kind."

"How do you know?"

"I can tell. If she had any pride she wouldn't lay around with just a robe on. She'd keep herself dressed in case anybody came in. And she'd tell her uncle the truth."

"He's a bastard."

"No, he isn't. He's a lonely old man. She can't say a civil word to him, and he's hurt by it. Wouldn't you be, if you were him?"

"If I ever get like him, I'll hang myself with a short rope from a high limb."

"Well, I don't approve of him hitting her, but a man is driven to it sometimes. He told me last night about how her mother hadn't been any good and how he didn't want her to be that way. You can't blame him for that, can you? He brought her up and he wants her to live straight." She paused. "Not like the way I was living with you."

"Why don't you try sleeping with Billings? Find out for yourself if he's a man or if he's only all talk."

"That's a nasty thing to say, Butch."

“Why else would he take you out?”

“For company.”

“That’s a joke. He wants to hit the sheets with you. He’s so hot after you, you could even marry him.”

“And what would that get me?”

“Probably a kid or so, and a lot of money.”

“I might spite you and do just that,” she said, her lower lip trembling. “At least he’d treat me as a man should, not like some boy who’s only interested in a girl’s bust measurement.”

She went storming off toward the house, and Butch returned to the tractor. Let her go ahead and marry Billings—she’d find out. He would work her in the fields, and break her back and spirit. By the time she got to be thirty she would be old and sour. Butch shrugged and goosed the tractor.

He got another load in that afternoon, the last of the hay that was ready, but although Billings had returned from town, he did not help except to guide the trailer back to the barn. After that he went over to where Lucy was stretched out on the grass in the sun, her back almost naked, and he sat down next to her.

“Billings has got it for that Lucy,” Jeff said as they washed up before supper. “Not that I blame him any. I could go for some of that myself. If you ask me, he sneaked one with her last night.”

“They were home from the movies too early for that.”

“Maybe he’s one of those two-minute guys.”

“Maybe.”

Jeff dried his hands on the dirty towel.

“How was that Candy last night, old buddy?”

“What do you mean?”

Jeff laughed. “Don’t kid me. Was she half as good as

she looks? Don't tell me it stopped with a beer—I wouldn't believe you. Boy, I wish he'd had me stay with her. I'd have pounded her right through that davenport."

"What are you worried about? You got yours."

"Yeah, and Mae's coming down here tonight. I forgot to tell her I'd be in town. Be a good guy and take over for me, huh?"

"Not on your life."

"Well, you can talk to her, can't you?"

They had ham for supper that night, baked with brown sugar and cloves, but there was too much fat.

"You mow in the morning," Billings said to Butch.

"Okay."

"And in the afternoon you bale. That way we won't get so far behind."

"When do I get a day off?"

"You haven't got one coming yet. Maybe Jeff's will be the last day off until the hay is in. You've got to put it away while you can."

"Any chances of using the old Ford?" Jeff want to know.

"Since when do you get a car to use on your day off?"

"I only asked."

"You can hitch into town. The town isn't so big but what you can walk around it. Besides, you might pick up with that girl again, and she's got a car."

"No chance of that."

"Don't tell me your troubles."

Candy put up a howl for food from the living room, but she didn't get it. All she got was a string of curses. Lucy blushed and played with the meat on her plate.

Butch finished, excused himself and walked over to the house. There was nothing to do and he did not have

much money. He guessed he had enough to go up to that bar, but he did not feel like it.

He had some clothes to wash, and he washed them in the sink, using a bar of Ivory in place of soap powder. When he finished rinsing the clothes, he hung them on a line. On his previous farm jobs he had had an iron that he carried with him, but he had lost that when leaving one place in a hurry. He would have to get another one.

Some farmers' wives would iron for you, but a lot would not. Mostly they had plenty to do without taking on anything more.

He was half asleep in the living room when the door opened and Mae Collins came in. Blinking his eyes and sitting up, he saw she was carrying a bottle.

"Where's Jeff?" she want to know.

"In town. Tomorrow he's off."

"Well, damn him. And me passing up a date to come down here." She raised the bottle. "See? I even brought this. The artist paid me, and I wanted to celebrate." She hesitated and then smiled. "So to hell with Jeff. I'll celebrate with you. You look like you need a drink."

"I won't say no, but liquor is a little out of my class. When you work for farm wages, you drink beer or nothing."

"I got forty dollars, and more to come," she said.

"You like the work?"

"It isn't bad. I undress and he takes pictures. When I get down to nude he takes a lot of pictures. But I didn't see any paintings around his room. Maybe you're right about him making them up and selling them."

"That figures. It's an old trick."

She played with the zipper on the front of her dress,

running it down a few inches and showing him that she was not wearing any bra.

"I should worry," she said. "A buck is a buck. And he don't ask nothing from me like most guys. You wouldn't even know there was a bed in the room. He takes his pictures, and when he's done I put my clothes back on again. He says he's seen so many naked girls that it don't bother him none."

Butch got a couple of glasses and opened the bottle. The liquor was rye. He knew he would have a headache in the morning.

"I'm going to get stoned," Mae said.

"Don't do it here."

"Why not?"

"Because you're under age."

"You'd feel different about me if I made you happy."

"No, I wouldn't."

"How can you tell unless you've tried?"

"I don't know," he said honestly. She sat down on the davenport and he sat opposite her. The whiskey burned his throat. "Your people know what you're doing for money?"

"I told them."

"What did they say?"

"They said I was no good. But, honey, they always say that. To their way of thinking, nobody who is young is any good. Sure, some of the girls get a kid, but most of them don't. And if you get a kid, you can go on welfare. I know a woman who lives in a shack, and she makes her living getting in a family way. She's got six kids and another one due any day. She gets along."

"Well, I guess that's one way."

There was a pause. "It's hot in here," she said, moving the zipper down a little further.

"What do you expect after the day we had?"

She moved her legs back and forth. "Pour me another drink, honey."

He got up and poured two drinks. He hoped she would not get loaded. Or that he wouldn't. He did not know what he might do if he did.

"This zipper goes almost all the way down," she said.

"So I notice."

"Jeff wouldn't be sitting over there."

"I'm not Jeff. I'm me. The guy who thinks you got off on the wrong foot."

She began to pout, rather prettily. "You going to preach?" she demanded.

"Far from it, but I think you ought to meet a nice fellow and settle down."

"Yeah, but the trouble is I like all guys. Or almost all guys. I get a charge out of it with everybody. Been that way ever since I was in high school."

"Did you go to school with Candy?"

"She was ahead of me."

"How about the boys? Did they like her?"

"They liked her bumps. She had the biggest bumps in school and her sweaters were tight. Fellows liked to catch her in the hall and rub up against her. They called her the cow."

He poured a couple of drinks. She was fooling with the zipper again. He could not see much through the narrow opening, but the tilt was there and so was the fullness. He decided she would make good carnival material.

"I like you," Mae said. "There's something about you I like."

"Thanks."

"But you don't like me. Why is that?"

"I like you all right, but I think you're foolish. One of these days you're going to get into a jam, and you're going to be nine months getting over it."

"If that happened I could get married."

"Who'd have you under those conditions?"

"Some guy might."

"Now you're dreaming."

She crossed her legs and he saw the inside of one thigh.

"It is hot in here," he said.

"You'll freeze in the winter."

"I won't be here in the winter. As soon as the hay is done I'm out of a job."

She thought about that.

"Why don't you work for my father?"

"You said he didn't pay very much."

"No, but look at the fun you'd have. I don't lock my bedroom door and they go to bed early most nights. You wouldn't have to sleep alone if you didn't feel like it. They wouldn't hear us. They wouldn't know."

She pulled the zipper all the way down, smiling at him.

Butch's hands clenched involuntarily. He got up with a lurch, fighting back his desire for the girl. "I better not sit here any more," he said. "Good night, Mae."

"Oh, damn you," she shouted after him as he went up the stairs. "You aren't a man after all."

A few minutes later, he heard her leave the house. He sighed with relief. That had been close.

CHAPTER XII

THE NEXT ten days were rough. Billings worked them long hours every day and the same thing on Sunday. Billings himself did not do much work, but took to hanging around the house.

"He's making it with that Lucy," Candy said. "While we sweat and strain, he's having his pleasure."

Candy was eating again, mostly due to Lucy's efforts, and her ankle was well, so she had to work in the fields and the barn. She always looked tired. If a cow needed service, she had to take the bull out into the pen, her slender arms hardly a match for the power of the animal. Butch had little chance to see her, except at meals and at work. He wanted her, wanted her with a terrible need, and he could not have her. One night when he was desperate, he went to town in the old Ford.

"Wouldn't you know it?" said the girl next to him at the bar, lifting her skirt to examine one leg. "Brand new stockings, and I get a run in them from this lousy stool."

"How do you know you've got one?" Butch asked.

"Can't you see it?"

"All I see is your leg, and it isn't a bad leg. In fact, it's a good leg."

"Well, the run is there. I felt it pop."

She was drinking beer, and Butch bought her one.

"You smell like the farm," the girl said. She was wearing a wedding ring, he noticed.

"I work on a farm."

"Like it?"

"It's okay as long as it lasts, but in another couple weeks I'll be moving on."

"I feel like doing the same thing."

"You're married, aren't you?"

"I was, but it didn't take. My sister came to live with us and then I caught my husband in bed with her. Mister, you can have that kind of a marriage. I don't want any part of it. I've got a job in an office and I can pay my freight."

"Where's your husband now?"

"They're living together on the other side of town. All he does is drink—he lost his job because of it—and my sister supports him. She must be nuts."

"Any children?" he wanted to know.

"No. We never quite made it in that direction. The first year we couldn't afford one—my husband was just getting his promotion then—and the next year, last year, we had to buy a car. So we put it off, and I'm glad we did."

They had another beer, and she looked at her stocking again, all the way up to where it was hooked onto her garter belt. Nobody else at the bar was paying any attention. Butch put his hand on her leg. Maybe she was not Candy Roberts, but he had to have somebody.

"You like my leg?" the girl wanted to know.

"I wouldn't have my hand on it if I didn't."

"You do that with every girl?"

"No. Just some."

She pushed his hand away. "Say, what do you think I am?"

"I don't know. A woman without a husband, maybe. A woman who misses what she had in marriage."

"You could be right," she admitted. "After two years of sleeping with a man, it's hard to sleep alone. You wake up in the middle of the night, and you want somebody there with you. Nights he used to wake me up, and when he did it was sort of wonderful, like a dream turning real. Then that sister of mine came along. I should have known better, but I didn't."

"Forget it," Butch said. "Tonight is tonight. Have another beer and put it out of your mind."

At midnight he drove her to her apartment. She had beer in the kitchen, and he drank a glass while she changed her clothes.

"That's better," the girl said as she joined him in the kitchen. "That girdle is enough to kill me."

"You're young to be wearing a girdle."

"Not so young. Twenty-two. And lots of girls do. Some of us are flat in the stomach and others of us get a little bulge."

She sat close to him and he could smell her perfume. He kissed her.

"Is this wrong?" she wanted to know.

"Not yet, it isn't."

"But you'd like to make it wrong, wouldn't you?"

"That depends how you look at it."

By three they were in bed, but she would not let him touch her. She kissed him, her naked body pressing his, but she would not go beyond that.

"Just stay with me," she begged. "Let me know you're here."

The next morning he left her, not knowing her name. He was late for milking. Billings was furious, yelling at

Butch that he could not have the car again. The old man kicked some pails around. One of the pails struck Candy in the leg, and she let out a howl. Billings told her to shut up and get busy.

"You shack up?" Billings wanted to know.

"Let's say I got delayed."

"Didn't want to leave it, huh?"

"You've got a rotten mind."

Butch helped finish up with the milking, and Billings was shouting at Candy all the time. There was a cow due at eleven from another farm, and he insisted that she handle the bull.

"I'm getting afraid of him," she said. "He knows the cow is coming and he goes crazy. I can just see him pulling that staff out of my hand and then pounding me down into the ground with his horns. Let Jeff or Butch do it, and I'll run one of the tractors. There's enough hay down to keep us going. I'll pull in a load."

"That's wet down there," Billings said.

"I know it is. It's always wet in that field. And the hill where you come out is steep. But I won't have any trouble. You started me driving a tractor when I was thirteen."

Billings finally told Jeff to take care of the bull, grumbling about how some women were never satisfied. He was still grumbling at breakfast, but when he looked at Lucy he smiled. Lucy wore a print dress that hugged her curves, and when she moved, she moved in all the right places.

"You could go into town for groceries," he said to her.

"Do you good to get out for a spell."

"All right, but I've only got a New York driver's license."

"Nobody'll bother you."

"All right."

"You mow," Billings said to Butch. "That last field toward the woods. Candy can get the load out, and Jeff can paint those doors in the barn until it's time for the bull."

"Candy ought to have some help," Butch said. "And there is enough hay down as it is. If it rained, we'd lose a lot of it."

"How many times do I have to remind you I'm boss? I might even give her a hand if I feel like it. You just tend to your own business."

After he was through with breakfast, he got the tractor that Jeff generally used and rode it across the flat land. Mostly they left the tractor in the field, but the night before it had needed gas and Jeff had brought it up to the barn. There was a gasoline pump near the barn and Billings bought at below station prices. A lot of farmers did that.

The tractor was a fairly new one, but there was something wrong with it. It didn't have the power it should have had. It needed a good going-over, but there was no time for that now.

Butch got to the field and lowered the cutting bar. The sun was hot enough, but there was a feeling of rain in the air. Billings was foolish to put so much hay down at one time. A storm might come up in a matter of minutes, and it might last for an hour or a week. Some summers, it was almost impossible to get the hay in. You would get it dry one hour, and it would be wet again the next.

Candy was working in the next field, and although Butch could not see her because of an old stone wall, he knew what it was like. It was bad. Even tractor tires sank into the ground, and the road out of the field was pitched

at an angle. It was no place for Billings to send a girl, but maybe it was better than taking care of the bull.

The hay was high and thick, and Butch did not force the tractor. If he blew a rod or something, Billings would really be down on him. Now he could not have the car again, and that hurt. Hitching into town early in the evening was all right but at night, late, there was not much traffic, just the young kids who were on their way up to the park.

"You're a fraud," Mae Collins had told him, last time he had seen her. "A girl practically begs you, and you walk off and leave her."

Butch guessed she was not missing anything. Jeff was making sure of that. Some nights she walked over to sleep with him, and when Jeff could get away, he met her in the woods. But Jeff was making the mistake of promising her marriage, and Butch knew Jeff was not going to marry anybody. He would keep after her until he got her in the same condition as Sherry James, and then drop her. Only it might not be so easy for him this time. Mae was the type who might go to the law.

Sherry had been out to the place twice, slightly drunk both times and feeling sorry for herself. Jeff had been up in the woods with Mae both times, and Butch had had to listen to Sherry's troubles. She had managed to get a loan on her car, but she was drinking it up fast, and the money was not doing her any good.

"I'd marry him tomorrow," she said once.

"Talk to him about it."

"But I always miss him. You talk to him for me, huh? Tell him that he's a rat but I love him. And I'd live out here. We only need a bedroom and a place to cook. As soon as the company takes me back, I'll start earning

money. We can live on what he makes, and put away what I earn for the baby.”

Butch had tried to talk to Jeff, but it had been no use. Jeff was stubborn, and he was afraid of the responsibilities of marriage. The thought of being a father scared him. Besides, he was having too much fun with Mae Collins. As soon as supper was done he was with her, either at the house or in the woods. Obviously Billings knew about it, but he did not say anything. He was too interested in Lucy to bother about anybody else's affairs.

Suddenly the tractor's engine coughed and died. Butch sat there in the sun, staring straight ahead. Billings would blow his top over this and maybe kick him off the place. Right now he was not ready to leave—unless Candy went with him.

He got out and examined the motor, but could not find the trouble. Getting back on the seat, he tried it again, but nothing happened. It would cost money to get a mechanic to come out from town—Billings would fuss about that. The best thing to do was to get the tractor Candy was using and haul this one up to the barn. There were tools in the shed. He could go to work on it and try his luck.

As he started across the field toward the stone wall he heard thunder in the distance. The sun looked hazy. That was not good.

A rabbit ran in front of him, and he wished he had a gun. That winter he had spent in a shack cutting wood, he had just about lived on rabbits and other small game. Some people thought you could not eat a skunk, but you could if you were hungry enough.

He reached the stone wall, climbed it, and right away saw that Candy was in trouble. As the thunder sounded

again, he jumped off the wall and ran forward. She had had the load on all right, but the whole trailer had tipped over on the hill. The left side of the tractor was cocked up in the air and the motor was silent.

"Candy!" he called.

He did not find her until he got around the other side of the tipped load. She lay between two bales of hay, and there was blood on her arm.

"Candy," he said, kneeling beside her. "You hurt, honey?"

Slowly she opened her eyes, and shuddered. "I was afraid it was him again."

"Afraid it was who?"

"My uncle."

"Was he with you?"

"He helped me load. Then he told me to take the hill on an angle, and I said I should go straight. Well, I did as he said, and then it went over. Look at my legs."

Butch looked at her legs—they were a mass of red welts.

"You didn't do that by falling," he said.

"No, he did that with his belt."

"You mean he beat you?"

"Until he was out of breath. He took off his belt and sailed into me, saying a storm was coming up and that I was a no-good tramp." She sat up. "But it isn't the first time. He's done it before."

"The bastard," Butch said softly.

"I can't stand it any more, Butch."

"No."

"Something has to be done."

"Yes."

"If I'd had that gun I'd have killed him. It would have been self-defense, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose so." His lips found hers briefly. "Let's get out of here, Candy. We don't have anything, but we don't have to put up with this."

She wiped the blood from her arm, but more blood oozed out of the long scratch. It looked as though Billings had caught her there with the belt buckle.

"It would be so easy," she said at last.

"To do what?"

"To have the farm, Butch."

"I don't see how."

She sat up straighter.

"When you back the trailer up to the barn. He's always behind it, isn't he? All you have to do is to keep right on going when he says for you to stop. It could be an accident—nobody would know. You just drive him right through the side of the building."

Butch thought about it seriously. He was not a born killer, but he did hate Billings—and he loved Candy. She had worked for the farm and she deserved it. Besides, it would be an accident. There would be an investigation, but he was confident he could get around that. He could say that he had not heard Billings, or the gas had jammed, or any one of a dozen things.

"I don't know," he said, at last.

"I thought you loved me."

"It isn't that. The farm would be nice, but we could get along without it. And even if he died ten years from now, you'd have a claim to it."

"And what do we do between now and then?"

"Find a spot."

She lay back on the grass.

“What? For fifty a week?”

“Maybe.”

“You couldn’t support four or five kids on that.”

“We wouldn’t have to have that many. You think I want to keep you pregnant every year of your life?”

She smiled, and her eyes were bright.

“But it would be fun, wouldn’t it?”

“You can have your fun without raising a mess of kids.”

“Sure, but if I was married to you, I’d want your babies. That’s what marriage is for. Love and babies.” She wet her lips with her tongue. “Love me now, Butch?”

“Not out here in the open.”

“Why not? Who’s to see us? Jeff is busy with that bull, and my uncle went storming up to the house.”

It would be crazy to do it out here in the open field, with the ground wet under her, her body bruised by the beating she had received. Still, they were partially hidden by the bales of hay. . . . Looking down at her, he could not think straight.

“Baby,” he said as he bent to her. “Baby, you drive me nuts.”

“Drive me nuts along with you.” She resisted his kiss for a second. “And make it good. Make it the best ever.”

Like a savage, he tore at her shorts and halter. Then she was naked, the glory of her body there for him to see. He felt the pounding in his head, the rush of blood that turned him into an animal of the woods. She cried out as he took her, cried out and clung to him, their bodies twisting in the sun.

Later he helped her dress, kissing her as he did so, kissing her mouth and her breasts.

"I'm afraid to go up to the house," she said.

"I don't blame you."

"Don't let him touch me again, honey."

"I'll break him apart if he does."

"Knock him through the side of the barn. That will finish it."

"Yes, I guess it would."

"We'd never have to worry again. Think about that. We'd have the farm and his money, and there isn't anything we couldn't do."

Butch got to work on the tractor and righted it in about half an hour. Not all the hay had come off. He managed to pull the trailer up the sharp incline, turning to the left to hook the other tractor on behind. Billings would scream about the work, but it could not be helped. And, on the bright side, the thunder had stopped, the haze gone from the sun. Apparently the storm had traveled east toward the river.

Going up to the barn, Candy rode the disabled tractor, steering it. Butch took his time and thought about what she had said. It would be simple to kill Billings, and then they would be set for life. They would expand the farm, hire more men. He would get out in the morning to see things were under way, then he'd go back to bed with her.

He cut the tractor engine near the shed and moved the load up to the barn. Billings did not come out, so Butch unloaded. Jeff showed up just as the last bale went off. Candy had already gone up to the house.

"That bull is all bull," Jeff said.

"Most of them are."

"But as soon as he'd been with the cow, he calmed down."

Jeff took the tractor and trailer down for another load. Butch went around to the shed to work on the other tractor. He tried the motor again, but there was no response. The engine was dead.

“You busting up my stuff?” Billings wanted to know as he approached.

“She just stopped.”

“Hot-rodding it, were you?”

“No.”

“Lucy saved lunch for you.”

“I don’t want any.”

Billings leaned forward to look at the motor—not that he could tell anything just by looking at it.

“I gave that Candy something she had coming to her.”

“I know. I saw her legs.”

“Well, she asked for it. She didn’t have to upset that load. I tell her to take the hill straight, and she goes up on an angle. Next time I’ll beat her within an inch of her life. Maybe I ought to do it anyway.”

While Billings was talking, Butch found out what was the matter with the tractor: one of the wires to the coil had come loose. He did not say anything to Billings. The tractor would be a good excuse to spend the rest of the day tinkering around and thinking.

“I asked that Lucy,” Billings said.

“Asked her what?”

“To marry me. What else? I’m old and she’s young, but I could satisfy her.” He smacked his lips. “Sleeping with her would be a pleasure. We’d sleep naked and I’d jazz her until she couldn’t see straight.”

“What did she say?”

“Nothing. She just blushed and went on fixing lunch.

But I didn't expect her to make up her mind right away. A girl has to think about a thing like that."

Billings drifted off, saying he was going down to one of the lower fields. Butch set about cleaning the tractor plugs. The plugs were bad, but that was not unusual. Tractors and chain saws were tough on plugs. He checked for a new set in the shed, found none, and put the old ones back in. Then he moved over to the shade of the building and sat down on the grass. He was still sitting there when Lucy came around the side of the building. She was wearing her bathing suit, and her skin was already tanned from the sun.

"Is Mr. Billings around?"

"He's down in one of the fields. Why? You want him to rub your back for you?"

She made a face. "I hate it when he does that. Sometimes his hand wanders."

"Then why let him do it?"

"Because I want the job."

"I understand that you might become Mrs. Billings."

"Oh, that. Do you think he was serious?"

"Sure. He wants a young number to keep him warm on those cold winter nights."

"Don't worry, I wouldn't marry him if he was the last man on earth. I saw Candy's legs—that was brutal. He must have been crazy to whip her that way. What could I expect from him if we got married? When the honeymoon was over he'd put me to work in the fields. I'd rather die than do that."

"There's a bus out of town if you feel like going."

"You don't sound like a former lover."

He snatched up a piece of green grass and began to chew it. "Sorry," he said.

"You could go with me."

"I know I could, but I'm staying."

"Because of her? Because of that Candy? Don't worry, I've seen you looking at her. I know what goes on. And I know she's after the property. Mr. Billings told me that."

"She's his only relative."

"Not if he marries."

"No, that's true enough. But who wants him?"

She was thoughtful for a moment.

"You hate Mr. Billings, don't you, Butch?"

"There's no love lost between us."

"And you'd do anything for Candy?"

"I didn't say that. Anything takes in a lot of territory."

Her voice was strained. "Have you slept with her?"

"When would I have a chance to do that?"

"There are ways."

"You ought to know."

"Don't be nasty. A girl like Candy isn't for you, Butch. She's out for herself. In a way she's as hard as Mr. Billings. I felt sorry for him at first, thinking he was a lonely old man, but I'm not sorry any more. He can't touch anything without destroying it. Some men are that way. They can't help it, And, in a way, you're like him."

"Yes, and if you hang around here, he's going to get at you some night. If I were you I'd grab my pay and run."

She leaned toward him. "Run with me, Butch."

"No."

She got up and ran her fingers around the suit where it dug into her thighs.

"I'm afraid for you, Butch. There's something wrong here, something terrible. I don't know what it is, but it scares me."

"I can take care of myself."

"Not with a beautiful girl you can't. This one isn't good for you, Butch. One girl can judge another and I know she's a tramp."

"Shut up!"

"Then you have been seeing her."

"Shut up. Shut up."

"You've been seeing her and she's been good to you. Did she please you as much as I did?"

He got up in disgust, glaring at her. "Go let Billings scratch your back," he said. "To hell with you. I'm going over to wash."

"There's hot water in the house. It's real hot."

"Thanks, but I'll use cold."

"And Candy is alone. Wouldn't you like that? Alone and wanting a man."

He walked away. He wished Lucy would quit and move on. She knew too much, or thought she did, and it disturbed him. He did not want anybody to know about his affair with Candy, in case he decided to put Billings through the side of the building. A smart cop might figure that to be a motive. With Billings out of the way, he could continue to work on the farm, and when the time was right he would marry Candy.

Mae Collins was in the living room, crying. Tears were running down her cheeks, and her breasts were heaving.

"Where's Jeff?" she asked between sobs.

"Getting some hay in." Butch stared at the girl. "I thought you'd be working. You take a day off or something?"

"You were right about that artist," she said.

"Was I?"

“He was selling prints of the pictures, and this morning the cops broke in on us. The police didn’t do anything to me, but my pictures are all over, and I’m so damned ashamed I could die. He didn’t even retouch them.”

“So what are you doing here?”

“I thought Jeff could help me.”

“I wouldn’t count on him.”

“Of course I know he has that girl in trouble. She came to see me and told me to leave him alone, but I figured it was none of her business.”

Butch went in to wash. The grease came off hard. He heard the front door close, and knew Mae was gone.

He went back to the living room, wishing he had a drink. He did not want to kill Billings, but he could not see any other way out. Candy would not leave the farm, and he had to have her.

“Hell,” he said.

He would have to kill Billings. There was no other way. When the haying was over, his job would be done and he would lose Candy forever.

“Hell.”

There was still time for him to go down to the fields and help out, but he did not move. The next day he would be hauling the trailer and Billings would be in back of him, up against the barn, his arms waving as he shouted instructions. One sudden lurch of the trailer. There would be no more Billings to worry about.

At milking time he went down to the barn to do his work. Billings was cursing about the hay lying in the fields.

“Maybe I’ve been spending too much time at the house,” he admitted. “But I think it’s been worth it. You rub her back and it’s like silk.”

"Silk can drive you nuts," Jeff said. "You get above a girl's knees and you go out of your mind."

Butch did not eat supper that night. About seven, Jeff left to walk up to the bar. Butch was glad to be alone, to have time to think.

Around nine, Sherry came in. She was feeling no pain. He did not see how she could drive, and told her so.

"Who cares?" she demanded. "Nobody cares, that's who. If I wrap myself around a tree, it'll be all over, and it might be better that way. I'm trying to be somebody and I can't. I'm lost. I love Jeff and he doesn't love me. And what other man would want me after this? A man who's decent doesn't want another man's bastard."

She staggered toward the door. "There's nothing here for me. I don't know why I bothered stopping."

"You should take a little nap before you do any driving."

"I can drive."

"That's what every drunk thinks. But you can't."

Her lips formed a hard line.

"A lot you know about it," she said. "When I get to the highway I'll wind her up to the peg." She shrugged. "It's better for me in town. I can stop off at a bar and get a guy to buy me drinks. If he's a nice guy I might take him up to the room with me. There isn't a man alive who can do me any harm now."

She went out, and Butch shook his head. She was on the way down, skidding fast. In her condition, she should be drinking milk instead of booze.

He was tired and went to bed early, stretching out naked on the bed, the heat of the night seeping in through the open window. When he closed his eyes he saw the

face of Billings, and he shuddered. Killing Billings would be almost like killing a deadly animal. Only Billings was human.

He was almost asleep when he became aware of somebody getting into bed with him.

"Honey," a voice said.

It was Candy. He came awake suddenly.

"You're taking a chance in coming here," he said.

"Not much."

"What about your uncle? Won't he miss you?"

"No, he went up to the bar with Lucy. I told him I was sick and couldn't go."

"They won't be gone long."

"They will if he has his way. He'll load her up on drinks and then he'll take her up to the park." Candy laughed. "I'd like to see him in the park with her."

His hands told him that she was naked. With a groan he found her lips with his mouth, and drove her head back into the pillow.

"We have to talk, Butch," she said finally, twisting her head away from him.

"It's a hell of a time to talk."

"I know, but this is important."

She gave him a lingering kiss. "He's going to change his will," she said.

"When?"

"As soon as he can."

"How did you find that out?"

"After supper he came into the living room and told me. He said he was going to leave it to the hospital."

"Well, we're no worse off than we were before. I guess he can do what he wants."

“But I’ve only stayed here to get the farm.”

“I know.”

“Don’t you want me to have it?” She kissed him, her mouth wet and hot. **“Don’t you want me to have it, honey?”**

“Sure, if it’s in the cards.”

“You have to do it tomorrow, Butch. You have to do it before he can see a lawyer. He’ll be in back of the trailer, waving his arms, and you won’t stop. Nobody will suspect anything. Just think that it could be an accident, and don’t think of anything else.”

Hot sweat covered him, but his hands were cold. If he did as she asked he would be a murderer. Maybe no one would know or suspect, but he would be a murderer just the same.

“I thought I heard something,” he said, lifting his head to listen.

“Just the house settling. It’s an old house.”

He put his head down again, and they kissed.

“You’ve got to do it,” she cried fiercely. **“On the first trip. Get him on the first trip.”**

“All right,” he breathed finally. **“I’ll do it. I’ll do it fast and clean. He’ll go through that barn like he was hit by a train.”**

There it was. He had said it, and he meant it. Billings would never beat her again, never have the opportunity to torture her lovely body. And he would not have to leave her when the haying was done. If he met her in the barn and he had the urge, they would go up in the hay. No, her bedroom would be better. They would be together the way they were now, clinging tight, her glorious breasts flattened against his chest.

She moaned when he took her, moaned deep in her

throat, and the sounds of their heavy breathing filled the room. In the distance he heard the wail of a siren.

An hour later, she dressed and left him. Exhausted, he fell into a sound sleep.

CHAPTER XIII

BUTCH COULD not eat breakfast. He sat across from Billings, thinking that in a few hours, even less, Billings would be dead. It was the kind of thought that made a man wonder if he was really human. Even when he had been killing rabbits to eat, Butch had felt sorry for them, cursing his poverty because it had made that necessary.

“You have to eat,” Lucy said.

“I’m not hungry.”

“The eggs too well done?”

“No, they’re just right. I guess it’s the heat.”

The phone rang, and Billings went in to answer it. The call was for Jeff.

“It’s Sherry,” Jeff said when he came back. “She cracked up the car last night just down the road, and they had to get the ambulance. She’s been asking for me, and I ought to go.” His face was white. “I see now I let her down. No man could have done worse.” His hands shook as he lit a cigarette. “I just hope she isn’t hurt too bad or hasn’t lost the kid.”

Billings let Jeff use the old Ford, and Jeff did not waste time getting out of the house. He looked like a man with things on his mind.

“You haul up the bales,” Billings said to Butch.

“All right.”

"I had a little beer last night, and I don't feel so good. But I'll guide you up to the barn when you get here."

Butch left the house. His legs were wooden, and sweat was pouring out of him. Until now he had been a fairly decent guy, but soon he would be a murderer. *Murderer.* The word burned through his mind. The blood that now flowed through the old man's veins would be splashed on the ground. But he would forget it. He would forget in Candy's arms. He would tell himself it had been an accident, that it could have happened to anybody . . .

Once he got to the bales of hay, he worked hard, anxious to get up to the barn and get it over with.

He completed the load and walked around the trailer. The edge of the wooden platform was sharp—it would almost cut a man in two. Billings would be broken and torn—in a sense, the victim of his own greed. He had worked his first wife to death, and now he was going to join her underground.

The load was heavy; the engine bellowed. Butch felt the heat from the motor, and he blinked the sweat out of his eyes.

Murderer.

He shook his head. When it was all over, he would go off and get drunk, and tear up the town. Maybe he would see that girl again, the one who hadn't let him do anything, and this time he would force her. Then later he would come back to Candy, and it would be good. They would have to be careful at first, but they would swim together in the lake, and afterward he would have her on the sandy beach.

Lucy—

Well, Lucy would drift on, perhaps to another carnival, perhaps to some man who could please her. There would

be no place for her on the farm, but, in a way, he would be sorry to see her go. On the road, their love had been real, and a man didn't forget that.

"Unhook me," she used to say.

"Who does it for you on the stage?"

"This is different."

Then he would unhook her, kissing her on the back of the neck, feeling the pounding begin in his head, and his hands would go around to her full, naked breasts. Then on long hauls between towns, she would ride with him in the cab of the semi, her head on his shoulder. More than once he had parked the big job to make love to her, and had been late getting in.

He saw the house and the barn up ahead, and he saw two figures on the grass—Billings sitting beside Lucy. He knew Billings was rubbing her back with lotion.

Candy was standing on the back porch. She looked good in shorts and halter.

Billings got up as Butch approached. Butch's throat tightened. He glanced again at Candy on the porch and grinned faintly, nervously. Now that the moment was rapidly approaching, he was full of conflicting emotions and old memories. He remembered his first cigarette, his first beer that he stole from a refrigerator, his first girl. He remembered the foster homes, and the panic that seized him when he was moved from one to the other. The welfare worker said he was trouble, trouble that nobody wanted even for a fee. He remembered the woman who called him into the shower, remembered drying her with the towel; the hunger that she had to make love with almost anybody—remembered rushing home from school to be with her.

Murderer . . .

Killer of the man he hated, taker of life . . .

He swung the trailer and tractor to the right, and Billings got up from where he had been sitting. So did Lucy, and Butch thought he saw a strange expression on her face. Then he noticed Candy coming down from the porch. She was smiling at him, warmly and intimately. Her body swayed, and she touched one breast with her hand, first at the center, then cupping it gently. Sweat poured down into Butch's eyes. He wanted Candy and nothing else—but he knew there was a price he had to pay for her.

“Good load,” Billings said as he came up to the tractor. “I didn't expect you for another twenty minutes.”

“Back me in,” Butch said. “I can't see past the load.”

“Any of the other stuff ready to bale?”

“Maybe. I didn't look.”

Billings moved around behind the trailer, taking up his familiar position, and then began to shout. Butch could not see him but he could judge the distance.

He was sweating harder now as he eased the tractor into reverse. One foot . . . two feet. He would wait until the last second, then jam on the gas.

His hands shook, and his heart pounded. Murderer. He would be a murderer and he would not forget. Never would he forget. Even Candy's love could not wipe out what he had done.

“Easy,” Billings yelled.

Now was the time. He looked desperately at Candy, then over at Lucy. Candy was still smiling, but Lucy had a worried look on her face. Her mouth was open, and just as he cut the motor, she screamed.

He could not do it. He was not a murderer. He could never become a murderer. There had to be some other way, some way that was honest and decent.

“You lousy crumb!” Candy screamed at him as she ran toward the tractor. “You weak-livered bastard!”

Feeling sick, Butch got down from the tractor. Candy was beating on his chest with her fists, calling him names.

“You had him, Butch. You had him and you quit.” She laughed crazily. “Marry you? I’d never marry you, you big clod! I had a use for you, that’s all!”

He turned, tears filling his eyes, and walked away. Candy did not love him. She had baited him with her body, just to get him to kill for her, but something inside him would not let him go through with it.

He did not even stop for his clothes. He just kept on walking toward the highway.

CHAPTER XIV

MRS. CLEMSON was understanding. She let him have the room on credit.

"You'll get something," she said. "I know you will. Farms are always looking for good help."

Upstairs, he sat on the bed and lit a cigarette. He had made a mess of things for sure.

After he finished the cigarette he lay down, sweating in the heat. Eventually he slept, but his sleep was troubled by a dream. He dreamed about those final minutes on the tractor.

When he opened his eyes, he knew somebody was in the room with him, and from the smell of perfume he knew it was a woman.

"Hello," Lucy said.

He sat up and rubbed his eyes. "How did you know I was here?"

"I didn't, but it seemed like a good guess. What are you going to next, Butch?"

"I don't know."

"Jeff is going to marry Sherry James. And she didn't lose the baby. The baby will be all right."

"That's good."

Lucy was seated in the old chair, and when she crossed her legs, he got a glimpse of one thigh.

"We knew what was going on," she said.

"Who knew?"

"Mr. Billings and me. He went up to the bar last night but I just pretended to go. I waited outside and when Candy went to you, I followed her. I got almost to the top of the stairs, and I heard what you were talking about."

"And you told Billings?"

"Yes, but he didn't think you were that kind. He was willing to take a chance. I couldn't help screaming when I did."

He rolled over and sat on the edge of the bed.

"He had no business beating her," Butch said.

"Mr. Billings knows that now, but she brought a lot of it on herself. When they were alone together, she cursed him, and she didn't care what she did. He'd take her to the Grange, and before he knew it she'd be in the back seat of somebody's car. She didn't care if the man was young or old, as long as he was a man. Sure, he worked her hard, and he made a mistake, but he knows that now. She wanted him dead. When you came along, she thought you were just the guy to do it. So she gave herself to you and led you on. You know the rest."

"I was a fool," Butch said miserably.

He watched her cross her legs again. She was slower about it this time, and he got a good look.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"That's up to you and Jeff, Butch. I had a long talk with Mr. Billings, and he said he'd sell out to you on a contract basis. He'd fix up an apartment in the main house for us, and Jeff and Sherry could have the other place. He wouldn't be around much because he's thinking of traveling."

“What about Candy?”

“She left this afternoon—she won’t be back.”

Butch thought about it. It would not be bad, buying the place slowly and working with Jeff. In the end they would both have something worth while.

“I thought you didn’t like the country,” he said.

“I like it out there. And after I had a baby, I’d be too busy to be lonely.”

He got up and walked over to her. She was a good girl, a fine girl, and he was lucky to have her love.

“Honey,” he said as he kissed her. “Honey, forgive me.”

She kissed him back. “You’re forgiven.”

“All the way?”

“Try me and find out.”

He did; and she had forgiven him all right—twice over.

THE END

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