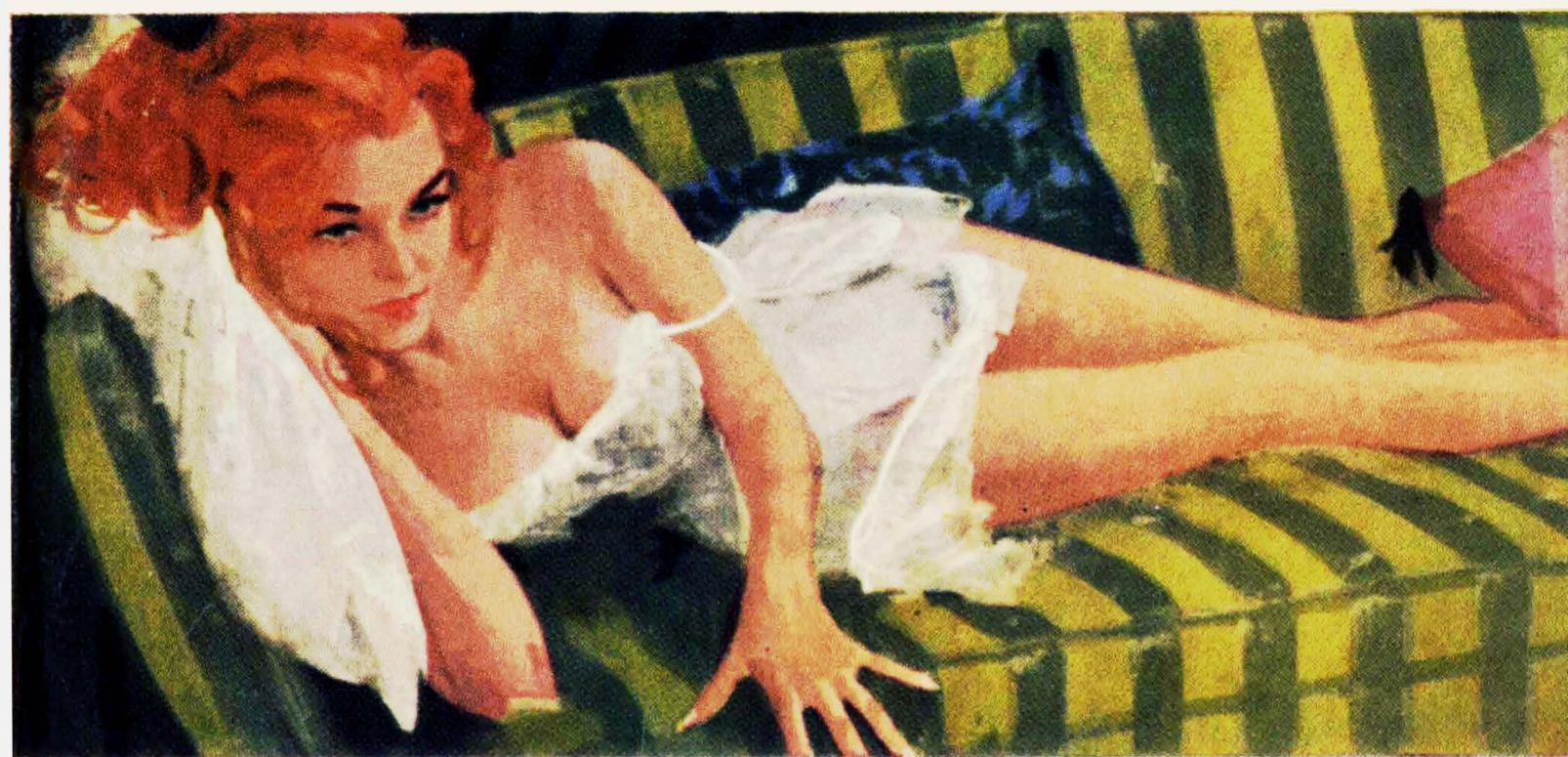


**B**rutal men  
started the sisters  
down — and they  
chose to keep right  
on going. Were they  
after excitement?  
Did they need  
the money?  
Or were they...



# MAN CRAZY

RICK HOLMES



A PROBING NOVEL OF THE FERVID BLOOD  
THAT LEADS TEEN-AGERS INTO TROUBLE!

B471F



# SHOW TIME

---

He jerked his wallet out of his hip pocket. "Two dollars?"

Annie Lou loosened one button and looked him in the eye. "Five."

"Five? Five! Just to look?"

"It was all your idea, mister." She turned and started to leave.

"Wait!" He hauled out his wallet again and added three singles to the two he already had offered.

"Bring it halfway and put it on the ground."

"All right," he said.

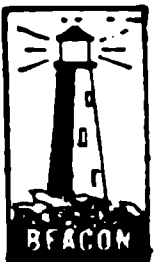
Annie Lou advanced cautiously, already thinking of what she would do with the money. She put the bills in her pocket, then slowly unbuttoned the front of her dress. The man moistened his lips. His nostrils flared wider and his eyes began to blink.

He said nothing—simply stared. Annie Lou felt a shiver of delight. So intent was the man's stare that Annie Lou looked down at herself to find out what was so fascinating.

When she looked up, he was coming toward her, arms reaching to grab . . .

# Man Crazy

RICK HOLMES



this is a BEACON BOOK

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work are fictional*

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**MAN CRAZY**

# One

SHE felt a hand on her shoulder and looked around into the eyes of Amos Goode, her father's brother. He had come with his wife, Maggie—and this was the first time Annie Lou had seen either of them in five years.

“You're damn sure getting to be a big girl,” he said. “How old are you now, Annie Lou? About eighteen, I guess, ain't you?”

She started to tell him she was only half past fourteen, but decided against it. “No, Uncle Amos. I'm younger than that.”

“Well, you certainly could pass for it any day of the week. Especially if your ma would let you put on a little lipstick and fix your hair different.” He smiled broadly, face flaming with perspiration. The hard grip loosened on her shoulder and the strong, work-toughened hand slipped downward.

“Amos—” Aunt Maggie spoke to her husband in a flat whine. Since her arrival, her sour expression had not changed.

The day was the hottest of the whole summer, Annie Lou thought. People milled about the farmhouse, favoring the shade of the porch, but Annie Lou mostly watched her two brothers and Susie and

## MAN CRAZY

her mother. She wondered if they felt, as she did, that the charred flesh in the plywood box was not really Pa, or anyone else. She tried to understand that now they were four fatherless children and a widow, as the relatives had been telling her. But she could not think farther ahead than the afternoon's weather. Down at the cemetery outside Hoppersville, the day would feel even hotter.

"Warm as the hinges of hell, ain't it?" Uncle Amos was at it again. His two fingers tweaked the tip of her left breast, causing Annie Lou to jerk back in pain. "Yes, sir," he said, "you could surely pass for eighteen."

"Amos," said Maggie, a warning note in her Tennessee drawl, "you'd better get out there and talk to the undertaker. I don't think Esther feels up to it right now."

"Esther's lucky to be rid of Horton and she knows it."

"You shouldn't talk like that. He was your own brother and this child's father." Maggie reached out as if to touch Annie Lou, but the fleeting show of sympathy vanished as quickly as it had come and the hand dropped dispiritedly. "Maybe he wasn't much, but this is no time to say so."

Amos shrugged, moved away. Annie Lou walked across the room and stopped beside the coffin. Try as she would, she could not work up a feeling of either loss or relief. She had not hated her father when he was alive. He had never mistreated her or any of the other children. Sometimes he had tried to knock Esther around a little, but only when he was too drunk to do more than swing wildly and ineffectually.

She had never been proud of him. She had never

## MAN CRAZY

counted on him. She had not loved him or feared him or hated him. Maybe that was wrong.

She wandered out to the narrow porch. The hearse waited in the dirt yard just beyond the china-berry tree. Uncle Amos was near the hearse, talking to the undertaker. Amos produced a bottle from his pocket. Both he and the undertaker took a swallow, wiping their mouths with the backs of their hands when they had finished. Amos took a second swallow before putting the bottle away.

A little later the plywood box was loaded into the hearse and the funeral procession got under way. Annie Lou went in Uncle Amos' car, just behind the hearse. The car was crowded. In back, Annie Lou was squeezed between her mother on one side, and Billy and Susie on the other. In the front Carl sat between Uncle Amos and Aunt Maggie.

Dry red dust, stirred from the roadway by the wheels, caked in the perspiration of their seven bodies. Behind them, in the half a dozen cars that followed, the discomfort would be the same. All the way to the highway the family was silent, not out of respect for the dead, but because the dust in their throats made conversation painful. At last the hearse turned right on the paved road and the dust stopped.

Amos Goode slapped at his clothing with one hand and wiped his face. "That goddam dust really sticks to you."

Maggie turned a wrathful glance on him. "Do you have to curse with your dead brother right up there in front of you?"

"What the hell's that got to do with it? Horton could cuss rings around me—ain't no reason I should stop just because he's dead."



## MAN CRAZY

Billy leaned forward and asked his brother, "You reckon Pa has gone to hell, Carl? I been thinking about it all day and the only way I can figure is Pa's gone straight to hell."

"Shut your mouth, boy," Amos said over his shoulder.

Billy continued worriedly, "Pa sure did a lot of drinking and cussing and—"

Amos turned. His big right arm came over the seat back, the hand flicking out like a whiplash. He caught Billy smartly across the face. "You shut your goddam little mouth with that talk about hell. Ain't you got any respect for your Ma?"

"Could be that hell's got you worried, Amos," said Maggie.

The hearse slowed ahead of them, turned off the highway and drove along ruts among scattered tombstones. Soon they reached a freshly dug grave. The cars all stopped and the people got out.

The little group stood forlornly in the broiling sun, some of the women cooling themselves with Japanese paper fans. The menfolk simply squirmed or mopped their foreheads or poked fingers down inside their buttoned collars. The preacher read from Scripture and tried his best to say something that might show the better side of Horton Goode. There was not a great deal to be said in his favor, and the preacher ended by calling on God to have mercy on the departed.

Annie Lou listened carefully all through the service and when the preacher was finished she realized he had done all he could in her father's behalf, and that if there really were a God, He could not be fooled by a lot of talk anyhow. He would know all there was to know about Horton Goode, and in the

## MAN CRAZY

final analysis Billy had probably made a pretty fair guess. Pa was probably already roasting in hell—or worse yet, he was nowhere. Pa had done nothing important enough for hell. The thought gave her a lonesome feeling.

On the way back to the house from the graveyard Amos advised Esther, “The best thing you can do is sell that place. The land ain’t any good. You’d best sell out and move into Hoppersville.”

“I doubt if I could get anything for the place, Amos.”

“What about the big dam the government’s going to build down on the river? Maybe they’ll have to buy your place when the lake starts filling up.”

“I’ll just wait and see,” Esther said, and turned her head and stared blankly out the car window.

People drifted in and out of the house all afternoon, come to pay their respects in death to a man none of them had respected in life. Aunt Maggie had fried a batch of chicken that morning, and had made biscuits. She also had made a tub of iced lemonade, which most of the women sampled. The men preferred something stronger, and Amos served the corn whiskey his brother had left in the barn. At least, Annie Lou thought, Pa had provided the whiskey for his own funeral.

Sam Lewis stopped and spoke to Esther. “Sure sorry about Horton. It was a mighty bad thing him having that wreck like he did. I’m sure sorry.”

“Thank you, Sam.”

“First time I’ve seen Amos since he left here and moved to Tennessee.”

Esther nodded absently.

## MAN CRAZY

Sam had been covertly watching Annie Lou ever since he got there. "That girl of yours sure is growing up, Esther. How old is she now?"

"Annie Lou? She'll be fifteen before too long."

"Fifteen! Lord, I'd have guessed she was eighteen or nineteen."

"She grew up fast."

"She sure did!" He stared at Annie Lou's large, high breasts and swallowed.

Annie Lou saw him staring at her and she smiled at him and turned away to pour herself another glass of lemonade. Her Uncle Amos stood nearby, listening to the preacher.

"They tell me that government dam is going to be about the biggest one this side of the Mississippi," said the preacher. "It'll make a lake fifty or sixty miles long. It might even take in this farm of Horton's—I mean, Esther's."

"They did a lot of that kind of thing in Tennessee on the TVA," Amos said. "Sometimes the land ain't good for anything but to put under water."

Amos looked around, then leaned toward the preacher. "How about a little drink, Reverend? I got some pretty good stuff outside and it surely does help a man in this heat. Ain't nothing worse than a damned funeral in the summer!"

"Well..." the preacher said slowly. Annie Lou sipped her lemonade and watched him. He unconsciously licked his lips, already savoring the corn whiskey. "I don't know that I ought to, Amos."

"It's good stuff, Reverend. Horton made it himself, and you know that was one thing on this earth Horton could do. He could make good whiskey. That's something you could have said about him out there at the graveyard."

## MAN CRAZY

The preacher slowly scratched his chin. "Well . . ." he drawled. "Maybe one little one wouldn't hurt."

Amos clapped the preacher on the shoulder and the two men moved outside.

Aunt Maggie touched Annie Lou's arm. "We're going to need more lemonade, child. You go in the kitchen and start squeezing the lemons."

"I don't want to squeeze lemons, Aunt Maggie. Why don't they all go home? What are they here for?"

The older woman frowned. "You're just a child, Annie Lou. It's the way things are done. These folks are here to pay respect to your Pa."

"They didn't have any respect for him when he was alive. The only reason any of them came here was to get whiskey or try to collect money he owed them. I don't see why they're here after he's buried. He's dead. Why can't everybody just forget about him now?"

"You don't understand. You're too young. Now you do as I say and get in there and squeeze lemons!"

"I don't want to. They can drink water if they're thirsty." She turned and started toward the front door, but Maggie caught her arm.

"You get in there and do as I say!"

Several faces turned toward them. One of the men smiled at Annie Lou and nodded.

"I don't want to bother Esther," Maggie said, "but I'll go to her right now if you don't mind me!" Her voice had risen and was starting to quiver.

Annie Lou felt like laughing, but she turned and said, "All right, Aunt Maggie. I'll take care of the lemons."

She went to the kitchen. Little Carl came in and watched her slice and squeeze.

## MAN CRAZY

"When are they going back home, Annie Lou?" he said.

"When are who going home?"

"Aunt Maggie and Uncle Amos. I don't like neither of them. Are they leaving today?"

"I think they're leaving in the morning."

"Can I help you cut those?"

Annie Lou nodded. Carl seemed relieved to have something to do.

"Annie Lou," he said after a while, "do you think Billy was right?"

"About what?"

"About—about Pa going to hell?"

Annie Lou smiled down at her brother. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe hell isn't so bad anyhow. Pa might even like it better there." She laughed briefly. "I suppose Pa would know a lot more folks there than he would in heaven."

The boy grinned at the joke. "Yeah, I reckon he would!"

Maggie's hawk face poked through the doorway. "You got them lemons squeezed yet? These folks here are getting mighty thirsty."

"In a minute, Aunt Maggie."

The face disappeared.

"The preacher and Uncle Amos ain't getting thirsty," said Carl. "They found that whiskey of Pa's out in the barn."

"You run outside and get the rest of the ice."

Annie Lou went into the living room and got the empty pail. Sam Lewis accosted her as she started back for the kitchen.

"Here, you let me carry that thing. You going to make up some more lemonade?"

"Yes, sir."



## MAN CRAZY

He went into the kitchen with her and closed the door. "You don't have to call me 'sir', Annie Lou. I'm a whole lot younger'n your Pa was. Me and him just did some business together every now and then, but he was a whole lot older'n me. Horton must have been forty or thereabouts."

"He was thirty-seven," Annie Lou said. "You can put the pail there on the table."

"Sure." He lifted the empty pail and set it on the table top. His body brushed against her and Annie Lou felt his hand move across her shoulder and then down to stop at the small of her back. The hand applied pressure, pulling her to him. "With your Pa gone you can come to me for anything you need, Annie Lou. You come to me any time at all, you understand?"

He smelled of sweat and whiskey, the same as Uncle Amos, and by this time, probably the preacher. The smell reminded Annie Lou of her father—who never had asked her to come to him for anything she needed.

She felt just a little richer, more powerful.

"Thank you, Mr. Lewis," she said.

"Whoa, now! None of that stuff, you hear me? It's just Sam to you. Just plain Sam."

His body was pressing against her, mashing her breasts against his hard chest. She lifted her face, wanting to tell him to please let her go because it was so hot, so awfully hot. He stared down at her and his mouth twitched oddly. "Damned if you ain't a pretty little piece. Damned if you ain't!"

The screen door squeaked open and slapped shut. "Here's the ice, Annie Lou," Carl said. "Hey, what are you all doing?"

Lewis backed away and stared malevolently at the

## MAN CRAZY

boy. "I was just comforting your sister, sonny. I was comforting her on account of her Pa being dead."

Carl nodded and lifted the smooth block of ice, straining to get it up on the table and into the pail. Lewis made no move to help. Instead he turned and went back into the living room.

It was after dark by the time the last caller had gone. The preacher had to be carried bodily to his car by Amos and Sam Lewis, and driven home by his wife.

"That man never could hold his liquor," Amos Goode said gleefully. "Not before he got that call from the Lord, and not after it!"

"A tool of Satan, that's what you are!" Maggie snapped. "Getting the preacher drunk that way at your own brother's funeral!"

"What's wrong with getting drunk at Horton's burying? All we drank was the stuff Horton himself made before he got himself killed. Damned if I see anything wrong in that!"

"Esther, you must be tired," Maggie said, choosing to ignore her husband's logic. "Why don't you go on to bed? We'll take care of everything."

Esther Goode nodded, a vacant, defeated look on her face. "I am tired, Maggie. I'm real tired." She rose wearily and went into her bedroom.

Outside, the two boys were yelling at each other.

"Amos, go shut those children up," Aunt Maggie ordered. "Tell 'em their Ma has gone to bed and is trying to sleep. You remind 'em their Pa is dead and this ain't the time for playing and rejoicing."

Uncle Amos, who had been watching Annie Lou intently, followed instructions in the least possible

## MAN CRAZY

time. He went outside to the boys and, a minute or so later, herded them in ahead of him, each rubbing his backside gently.

Aunt Maggie and the two girls cleaned up the glasses and swept out the dust and dirt tracked in by the day's visitors. The boys were put to bed. Amos turned restless, wandered outdoors and in again. When the cleaning was done he was nowhere to be seen.

"You girls go on to bed now." Aunt Maggie sat down with her knitting under the lamp by the window. Pa's coffin had been in the same spot.

Susie, fearful of the stern woman, went straight to her room.

"I think I'll stay up a while," Annie Lou said.

Her aunt looked at her for a moment, then shrugged and went back to knitting.

Annie Lou sat for a while, watching disinterestedly. The house still held the day's heat. She went outdoors, but no breeze stirred. The sky was a mass of stars, so bright that some of them seemed to be only a little way above the top of the chinaberry tree.

"Who's that out there?"

She recognized Amos' voice, coming from the direction of the barn.

"It's me. Annie Lou."

"Come here a minute," he said. "Over here at the barn."

She walked to the open door and saw him scrounging around inside by the dim light of a kerosene lantern. He looked up.

"You know where your Pa kept any more of that corn whiskey?"

## MAN CRAZY

She stepped inside. "I think he kept some over yonder," she said, pointing.

Amos went to the place she had indicated, his gait wobbly. Annie Lou paid no attention to his drunkenness. She was accustomed to a drunken father.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, here's another jar. Old Horton made pretty damn good stuff."

"If he had done more farming and made less whiskey he might not be dead tonight," Annie Lou said.

"You mean because he had that wreck while he was hauling liquor?"

"That, and because he wouldn't stop for the law."

"He'd of gone to jail if he stopped."

"But he wouldn't have been dead."

Amos unscrewed the top of the mason jar and took a swallow. He looked at Annie Lou. His eyes remained on her face for several seconds, then dropped to her breasts. He held out the jar to her. "Did you ever have any of this stuff your Pa made?"

She nodded. "I tasted it once. I didn't like it."

Amos laughed. "It ain't the taste, it's what it does to you. Makes you forget all your troubles."

Annie Lou tilted her head. "I haven't got any troubles." She thought of her sister, going to bed when told, and the two little boys being spanked to keep them quiet. No one told Annie Lou what to do. She had no troubles.

Amos sat down on a wooden box and patted the surface beside him. "Come over here, Annie Lou. I'm tired of the rest of 'em there in the house. You come over here and talk to me."

His face had grown peculiarly dark in the flickering lamplight, and she hesitated, not quite knowing why. "I don't know. I better get back inside and sit with Aunt Maggie—"

## MAN CRAZY

"To hell with Maggie. I got to go back to Tennessee tomorrow. I might not get to talk to you for a long time, maybe never. I want to talk to you tonight."

His big powerful body leaned slightly forward. His eyes never left her and he went on patting the box slowly.

"Ma might need me—"

"Your Ma has gone to bed. You come here, Annie Lou. You come here now, by God, or I'll come over there and get you."

She smiled at the way he said it. She approached slowly across the hard clay floor, and sat beside her uncle on the box. The smell of him was strong—sweat and dust and whiskey. He took another drink from the jar, screwed its lid on and set it down. He rested his hand on her knee.

"So you ain't got any troubles, huh?" he asked. "How about the boys at school, don't they trouble you sometimes?"

She nodded. "Sometimes they do. They holler and throw things sometimes. That's about all. It doesn't really bother me."

"That all they do? Don't they ever do this?" Amos' other hand came around slowly and settled on Annie Lou's breast. "I'll bet them boys do this all the time."

A quick spear of sensation went through Annie Lou. Maybe it was time she went back to the house. But as the thick hard fingers kneaded and caressed her, she did not move.

"You didn't answer me," Amos said. "Don't them boys at school ever try to do this to you?"

"Sometimes they try. I don't let them."

"Why don't you? Don't you like it? Don't you like for me to do this?"



## MAN CRAZY

"I—I don't mind, if that's what you want to do."

He laughed, unbuttoned the front of her dress. "You ain't got anything on under that dress," he said, surprised.

"I took it off after we got home from burying Pa. It was so hot."

Her breath caught suddenly. Something was happening, something strange, something she liked.

She turned her head toward Amos and saw that his face was only inches from hers. His eyes glistened in the dim lantern light. His breath was hot against her as his face drew even closer.

"I—I think I'd better go back in the house," she said quickly. She tried to push him away.

"You ain't going in no house, Annie Lou. Not right now you ain't." His mouth came down on hers, his heavy lips apart, his tongue pushing against her closed lips.

As she tried to pull away, there was a sound of tearing cloth—her dress. The rough-skinned hand came down across her belly. She renewed her efforts, fighting silently against the massive force that was carrying her off the box and onto the clay straw-littered floor. As they fell his mouth slipped away from hers.

"I—I have to—I have to go in the house—"

"You ain't going anywhere, Annie Lou. I knew the first minute I set eyes on you yesterday. I knew I was going to have you before I left here. You just lie still—"

He pressed down on her, forcing the breath from her. Heat was everywhere, inside, outside, so hot. She tried to push away, tried to squirm from beneath the oppressive weight but it was as though she were trying to move a mountain, to move from beneath

## MAN CRAZY

the all-encompassing sky. Suddenly, it happened. The searing pain, like nothing she had ever before experienced. She opened her mouth to scream but Amos' hand clamped down on the scream. She tried to draw air into her lungs. She felt as though she were bursting while Amos forced against her, his own breath coming in short heavy gasps. Suddenly the feeling changed. The pain was not gone, but was overshadowed by something else, something that grew to a fiery starburst inside her. Her hands ceased pushing against him. Slowly, almost reluctantly, they went around and clamped upon the broad back, the nails digging in as her body arched up to meet him.

She heard screams, and at first, from some far-off place, thought it was she who screamed. She forced her eyes open and saw Maggie standing over them with a blunt board in her hands, beating down, down. Her face was contorted with rage and she screamed, "Evil! A tool of Satan, Amos Goode! You're a tool of the devil!"

Amos rolled over, raising his arms to protect himself. He crashed against the side of the barn and scrambled to get up. Maggie reached for another weapon. When she whirled back to Amos, a long rusty knife in her hand, she yelled, "I'll do it! I'll fix you so this will never happen again! I swear I'll do it!" She lunged at him with the knife, leaving no doubt as to what she had in mind.

Amos yelled in terror. He got his feet under him and dashed for the open barn door, his trousers dragging from his left ankle. He vanished into the darkness with Maggie, screaming like a witch, a bare six feet behind him.

Annie Lou lay quiet for a moment, then rose slowly on her elbow and pushed back her hair.

## MAN· CRAZY

“What’s all the hollering about?” Round-eyed, Carl and Billy peered at her from the door. “Hey, how come all your clothes are tore like that?” Billy asked.

Annie Lou came slowly to her feet, pulling her dress around her as best she could, though now it was little more than a rag.

“How come Aunt Maggie’s chasing Uncle Amos out there in the woods?” little Carl said. “Is it a game?”

Annie Lou brushed at herself to remove the straw and dust. She put her hand on her brother’s head. “I guess that’s what it is, Carl. I guess it’s some kind of game.”

They left the barn. Down toward the old Crandall place, Annie Lou heard Amos and Maggie, like dogs baying after a coon. The stars had not changed in the sky. They were neither brighter nor dimmer than they had been before. She lifted one hand to her breast.

The stars had not changed. But a change had occurred. She knew more. She was not as poor as she had thought. Her Pa had been nothing at all—but there were other men to take his place, to care about her, pay attention to her. Yes, how willing they were to care about Annie Lou!

Roused by the racket Amos and Maggie were making, Esther Goode called from the house, “What’s wrong?” She added, making out her daughter’s figure in the starlight, “You all right, Annie Lou?”

“Fine, Ma,” Annie Lou answered. She went indoors.

She slept peacefully.

## Two

IN September, Annie Lou found she was the shabbiest girl in her class. Her wardrobe, never extensive, now showed that the Goodes were desperately fixed. Even with his vagaries and indolence, Horton Goode had produced a sporadic income. Now it was gone.

One of the girls in Annie Lou's class, Grace Pearson, brought a paper bag to school one morning with an almost-new skirt and blouse in it. "If they're any use to you, keep them," she told Annie Lou in private. Grace was one of the funny smart kind, with intense brown eyes and a soft voice. She got the best marks in class, and all but one of the boys paid no attention to her. Grace's boy friend was Robert Kramm.

Annie Lou explained her new clothes to her mother simply. "She's sorry for me, having nothing, so she gives me what she can spare. You like the blouse on me, Ma?"

"It's a little tight," Esther Goode said in a troubled voice. "You have grown so—but at least it's whole. Thank the Lord there are kind people."

Annie Lou kept feeling she owed Grace Pearson something for the good second-hand clothes. One day, between study hall and home economics, she

## MAN CRAZY

met Robert Kramm in the corridor. Annie Lou was not hurrying and neither was he.

"You look very nice today, Annie Lou," he said. He was a senior and, like Grace, one of those who got good marks. He too had a soft voice with a kindly tone, as though he pitied Annie Lou.

"Thanks to my friend," she said, drawing a deep breath and straining against the blouse. "These were Grace Pearson's clothes. Maybe you remember them on her."

The boy looked down at her, thoughtfully at first, and then confusedly, as though surprised by thoughts he hadn't expected in himself. "No" he said. "I don't remember. Maybe on you they look—different—not like Grace."

Her weight on one foot, Annie Lou swished the full skirt as she talked. "I sure wish I was as smart as Grace. I sure wish someone would help me understand that book on world history. Must be I'm just not very bright."

"Why, that's not so!" Robert Kramm protested, his craggy young face flushing with indignation—and something else. "You're as bright as anyone. But you have things hard at home, I guess, and—well, can I help you, Annie Lou? We could drive up to the promontory after school, bring along that ape book of yours. It's quiet and nice there. I'll be glad to help."

"I appreciate that," said Annie Lou. She hurried at last, leaving him and heading for home economics.

The promontory was magnificent and serene in the fading light of an autumn afternoon. Robert parked off the road. For a few minutes, the two students,



## MAN CRAZY

with Annie Lou's textbook open on their laps, talked about the long-gone monarchies of Europe. Robert Kramm turned restless. "You have some kind of block," he told Annie Lou desperately. "Like I said, you're as bright as anyone, but something in your mind fights against learning."

She sighed and closed the book. She was unexcitedly aware of her own flesh, its softness, roundness and warmth under the castoff clothing, and of the boy's helpless interest in her. "I am sorry I wasted your time," she apologized. She faced him, lowered her eyes. "But you certainly tried. I feel you are one of my friends."

"I'm more than that," he said. "I would want to be more—much more—" He stopped talking, embraced her fervently, and kissed her lips. The kiss was sweet to Annie Lou. The kiss made her one of the accepted, good crowd.

Sighing all the while, she yielded more and more to his fumbling male-virginal advances. His trembling, cold-sweating hand explored her full breasts and the ripe inward curve of her thighs. She relaxed even as she shivered in pleasure, feeling generous and wealthy.

"I've got to," he breathed. "I've got to—oh, Annie Lou, I've got to—"

She knew what he meant. She opened her eyes wide, and put a restraining hand on his chest. "We must stop now," she said. "Right away. Before we do what's wrong, Robert. I know it's hard. But you and Grace Pearson—well, she's my friend and you're my friend and in the long run, what would you want with a foolish little girl like me? Please, Robert. I ask you, as my friend—take me home right away. I will always respect you if you do."

With obviously tremendous effort, the boy with-

## MAN CRAZY

drew from Annie Lou's arms. "You angel," he said. "You beautiful angel. I won't hurt you. We'll do it the way you say. But some day—when we're older—"

He drove her home in silence. When they parted under the chinaberry tree in the Goodes' front yard, he protested, "I'm still worried about you and that history test. How will you make out?"

"Don't worry about me," she soothed him. "I'll do the best I can."

She felt pretty good, for the first time, about wearing Grace Pearson's old good clothes. Not such a beggar. She had returned Grace's favor by setting Grace's boy friend free, sending him back to Grace, instead of keeping him for herself. She was proud and glad.

She still had a problem, though, with the world history book.

Next day after class she approached Mr. Burrows, the sarcastic tweedy teacher who was new to Hoppersville this year.

"I know I'm asking a lot of your time," she prefaced her plea modestly. "I know I'm not catching on in this class as fast as some of the others."

"That's true. You're failing the course."

Annie Lou shook her head resignedly. "I guess that's only as it should be, Mr. Burrows. But I sure wish I could do better. My folks—well, we're not the kind that would have newspapers regular, like people really should, or lots of books to look things up in, or even a television set that you get the news on. I feel so ignorant. I don't care what mark you have to give me—but if only you could explain some, so I wouldn't have to feel so stupid all the time, I would be thankful, Mr. Burrows."

## MAN CRAZY

Mr. Burrows was thirty, maybe more. Nature had given him thin, suspicious features and he had gone right along with nature in his habitual expression. Annie Lou watched in fascination as kindness and enthusiasm struggled to express themselves on a face no more designed for those emotions than her own brain was for European monarchs.

"Why, that's wonderful, Annie Lou," Mr. Burrows said. "The thirst for learning, I mean—do you know how few students really have it? I didn't realize—forgive me—your handicaps."

"You'll help me, then?"

"Of course," he pledged. For an instant, he looked as young as Robert Kramm.

Annie Lou progressed amazingly through Mr. Burrows' after-school tutoring. At mid-semester, she scored A-minus in his course.

At eight in the evening of the same Wednesday when marks were announced, Annie Lou showed up in the study of Mr. Burrows' three-room Hoppersville apartment. One of the boys in her class—not Robert Kramm, but another—had taught her how to drive and was almost always willing to lend her his car, which she found a great convenience. She had been coming to Mr. Burrows' place for tutoring, for instance, three or four nights a week.

"I want to thank you," she said. "I feel so good about passing the course." She studied him out of wide blue eyes.

He gripped the arms of his chair, not rising, seemingly not trusting himself to rise. "Annie Lou," he said hoarsely. "I have done you a great wrong. I—I swear, I couldn't help myself. Even now—I can hardly help myself. You're so pretty, so soft—and I've

## MAN CRAZY

taken advantage of you. Not just once. I despise myself. I ought to be shot.”

“Now don’t you feel that way,” she said. “You have taught me a lot, just as you promised. I was so ignorant.”

He lurched to his feet. “I shouldn’t—but once more. Just once more. After this, I swear, I’ll leave Hoppersville—maybe stop teaching altogether. But I’ve got to have you just once more—”

She smiled at him vaguely.

The teacher, for all his slight build, was surprisingly strong. He picked Annie Lou up in his arms, carried her to his bed and smoothed her unprotesting form flat against the spread. He crooned at her in a kind of passion. “You’re my dream. Living clay. Beautiful. The mind to be fashioned, the body to be adored—”

They all said different things.

But what happened was generally the same.

His weight crushed against her, as though every part of him hungered and thirsted for every part of Annie Lou. At one point, they seemed to leave earth together, to cruise infinity clinging to a pinpoint of orbital ecstasy.

She felt rich. She felt powerful. She felt wise. A good feeling, if you were Horton Goode’s orphan, and you and your Ma and sister and younger brothers had just been put on the county welfare rolls, because otherwise, you didn’t eat.

For two years, Esther Goode kept hoping her farm might be part of the area of the new government dam. In the end, her hopes were dashed. The water-line came to the Crandall farm which bordered their

## MAN CRAZY

place on the southeast. The widow Crandall, who had moved into Hoppersville, had been paid a fabulous price for her land, not only the part the lake was claiming, but also the remainder. Someone from Capital City had bought the Crandall land which would border the new lake.

People said changes would come. But for the Goodes, things just got worse.

One hot afternoon, from the top step of her porch, Annie Lou watched a tan pickup truck roll slowly in their direction, a tired boil of dust following it. The truck, property of a surveying company according to the legend on its chassis, pulled to a stop at the edge of the yard. The driver got out and walked toward the porch.

He touched his cap to Esther, but his eyes settled with something more than passing interest on Annie Lou. "Afternoon," he said. "I'm looking for the Crandall farm."

Esther pointed down the road toward a tumble-down collection of abandoned buildings. "That's it."

The man nodded, never taking his eyes off Annie Lou. She stood up slowly and took a deep breath, pushing her breasts outward. The man's mouth dropped open a half an inch.

He turned quickly and went back to the truck. Not driving off, he said something to the two men waiting for him. They all leaned forward on the seat to get a look.

"Wonder what surveyors are going to do at the Crandall place?" Esther mused.

Another of the men got out of the truck and came toward the porch. He asked, smiling. "Might I have a drink of water, ma'am?"



## MAN CRAZY

"Take him in the kitchen," Esther said to Annie Lou.

The man followed her into the house. He was younger than the driver. She poured him a glass of water, and asked. "How close is the lake going to come?"

He took a drink and shrugged. "I'd just be guessing right now, but I'd say about a quarter of a mile from here." He finished the water and put the glass down. "Thanks."

He went back to his truck and Annie Lou to her top porch step. All three men were grinning as the truck moved off, raising a trail of dust.

"They're all alike," Esther said. She had noticed their attention to her daughter. "Don't think of but two things. Whiskey and women."

Annie Lou smiled to herself, wondering what Esther would say if she knew that Annie Lou could not have agreed with her more.

"Looking doesn't hurt anybody, Ma," she said.

"It don't stop there, baby. You'll find that out soon enough."

She turned and went in the house, the door slapping shut behind her.

Annie Lou rose, stretched luxuriously, then walked down the road toward the Crandall place, where the truck had gone.

The truck was parked in a clearing two hundred yards downhill from the empty Crandall house. The door on the driver's side was open. One of the men sat behind the wheel, studying some papers. The other two were nowhere to be seen.

"Is this where the water's coming to?" Annie Lou asked him.

The man looked up. He was the only one of the

## MAN CRAZY

three who had not left the truck at the Goodes'. He was older than the other two, with a white stubble over his face.

He brightened. "Say, you're the girl from back there at the farmhouse."

She nodded, her hands behind her, swinging her shoulders. "Is the water coming clear to here?"

"About another fifty yards down in the woods."

Annie Lou walked toward him. "Will they cut down all those trees?"

His eyes dropped to her breasts, where she had failed to fasten the topmost button. "Most of 'em. They'll leave some underwater—good for the fish. And fish in water will keep it pure."

"Where are your two friends?"

"Down the hill. Didn't really take three of us for the job." He climbed out of the truck and shut the door. "Be kind of nice living so close to the lake, huh?"

Annie Lou shrugged. "I guess so."

"Lot of activity, summertime. Always is around these lakes the government's building. People got a lot of money these days and this gives 'em something to spend it on."

"Everybody hasn't got a lot of money."

He laughed, his eyes flicking up and down her body as if they were out of control. "No I suppose not."

"We were hoping the lake would come far enough so the government would buy some of our farm. We could have used the money."

"What kind of work does your father do? He a farmer?"

"Pa's dead. He used to grow a few crops and make

## MAN CRAZY

a little whiskey. He got killed one day when the law got after him."

"Hauling booze, eh?"

She nodded. She felt his eyes on her and again she took a deep breath and pushed her breasts out. "I guess I'd better be getting back. I just came down to see what you all were doing."

He put a hand out quickly. "No—I mean, what's your hurry? My partners are way to hell across the hollow. I ain't busy. Why don't you just — just stick around a while?"

Annie Lou smiled. "What for? Ma needs me back at the house. We've got some corn to pick. Something always needs doing."

"Girl like you shouldn't have to be working on a run-down farm like that."

"What else should I be doing?"

"Get married. Go to Hoppersville or down to Capital City and get a job. That's where the money is, not in these godforsaken hills."

Annie Lou leaned against his fender. "I don't know how to do anything. I'd like to be a secretary or something, but they don't teach that in the schools around here."

The man licked his lips. "No reason a girl like you should work at all. No need for it."

"A girl like me? What kind of girl would that be?"

"What kind? Good-looking, that's what kind! My God, you're about the best-looking thing I ever saw!"

"Do you really think so?"

"I don't think so, I know so. You probably got fifteen or twenty young bucks chasing after you all the time. Ain't that right?"

"Some of the boys in town like me. At least, they act like they do."

## MAN CRAZY

He took one step toward her. "I can see why." His eyes slitted and an accusing smile twisted his lips. "I'll bet every now and then one of 'em does more'n just look, don't he?"

Annie Lou smiled back. "What else would he do?"

The man's arm lifted and he took another halting step, bringing him face to face with her. His hand came out and gently touched her left breast. Annie Lou twisted away and the man lunged after her. Suddenly he stopped, breathing hard and staring.

"They're real," he said.

"You ought not to do that, mister," Annie Lou said.

He began to move toward her again, as he might have approached a wary animal. "I won't hurt you. Honest to God I won't. Just don't run. I swear I mean you no harm."

Annie Lou backed away, keeping the distance uniform between them. "That's not the way you acted. I ought to go on home."

He shook his head and held out his hands, palms up, as if to indicate his good will and harmlessness. "You ain't got any padding the way a lot of women have. Lord, I don't think I ever ran into the equal of it!"

"Of course I don't wear any padding. Why should I?"

"I said I wouldn't hurt you, wouldn't lay a hand on you. Now, it wouldn't do you no harm to let me just—just have a little peek, would it?"

"Why should I?"

He gave a jerky shrug. "Satisfy me, I reckon. Just to sort of make sure you ain't got any padding there upstairs. You might be just fooling me. You pulled away so quick just now I couldn't really be sure."

## MAN CRAZY

Annie Lou shook her head. "I don't care what you think, mister. It doesn't make any difference to me at all."

Dark perspiration stains appeared at the man's armpits. Sweat beaded his face and neck. He took out a handkerchief and wiped his face. "Look. I'll tell you what. Just to satisfy my curiosity I'll give you a dollar if you'll unbutton and show me. That's all. Just let me take one look to satisfy my curiosity. It'd be the easiest dollar you ever made. How about it?"

Annie Lou shook her head.

"Goddam it then! Two dollars!"

"You shouldn't cuss that way, mister. My Pa used to cuss all the time and it never got him anything."

He jerked his wallet out of his hip pocket, pulled out two one-dollar bills and waved them. "Two dollars? Just a peek? One little look?"

Annie Lou cupped her breasts. The man's Adam's apple bobbed twice. She drew in a breath and shook her head. "Uh-uh."

He smacked his fist on the hood of the truck, quickly withdrew the hurt fist and rubbed it. In a low, hopeless tone, he suggested, "Three?"

Annie Lou loosened one button and looked him in the eye. "Five."

His eyes popped wide. "Five? Five! Just to look?"

"It was all your idea, mister." She turned and started to leave.

"Wait! Hold on!"

She stopped, looked back over her shoulder.

"I may not have that much with me. Maybe I could pay you part now and bring you the rest later. I could drop it by your house."

Annie Lou thought of the bill collectors who had

## MAN CRAZY

dropped by lately. She could put them off just so long, adroit though she was. She said, "Nope. This is strictly a cash deal."

He hauled out his wallet again and added three singles to the two he already had offered. He extended the money. "All right. Here it is."

"Bring it halfway and put it on the ground."

"Do what?"

"You heard me."

"To hell with that! So you can grab the dough and beat it? You come and get it."

Annie Lou shrugged and turned away again.

"All right," he said. "We'll do it your way." He walked half the distance to Annie Lou and put the five one-dollar bills on the ground. He backed to the truck and waited.

Annie Lou advanced cautiously, already thinking of what she would do with the money. For one thing, she needed a bottle of toilet water. She put the bills in her pocket, then slowly unbuttoned the front of her dress to the waist. The man moistened his lips. His nostrils flared wider and his eyes began to blink. She pulled the front of the dress open wide.

He said nothing—simply stared. Annie Lou felt a shiver of delight. His eyes were caressing her. She turned a little to the right and then to the left, in a sudden desire to give him his money's worth. The sun was warm on her breasts. So intent was the man's stare that Annie Lou looked down at herself to find out what was so fascinating.

When she looked up, he was coming toward her, arms reaching to grab. She jumped aside, putting her foot in his way as he passed her. He tripped and sprawled.

## MAN CRAZY

Before he scrambled to his feet, Annie Lou had put a respectable distance between them.

"You damned little bitch," he shouted after her. "You damned teasing little bitch! You ought to have those jugs cut off and thrown in your face!"

Annie Lou stopped, turned and looked at him for a moment. She threw back her head and laughed. The man glared at her menacingly and then broke into a smile. They both laughed, as if he had said the funniest thing ever uttered.

After a while, when his laughter subsided, the man said, "Well, I got what I bargained for."

Again she turned to go.

"Wait a minute! I've got a ten-dollar bill in my wallet. It's the last dime I've got with me, so help me. You want it?"

She tilted her head. "What'll I have to do?"

"Just take off your clothes and come here. I'll show you."

She frowned.

"Think what you could do with ten dollars." He took the bill from his wallet and waved it in the sunlight.

When she came no closer, he put the bill where he had put the others and moved back, like a hunter who has baited a trap and retires to watch the results.

Annie Lou darted forward, pocketed the money, and quickly retreated to the edge of the oak grove. While the man watched avidly, she finished unbuttoning her dress and took it off. Beneath, she wore only white panties. She pulled them down over her hips and thighs, and stepped out of them, putting them on top of her dress. She started toward the man, her heart pounding heavily inside her.

## MAN CRAZY

From the hollow below came a voice. "Frank! Hey, Frank!"

Annie Lou stopped short.

"Just my partners," the man said, as though the words gave him great difficulty. "Come here. Come here to me."

From the hollow the voice called again. "Hey, Frank, where are you?"

"Oh, no," Annie Lou said. "Not with them here!"

He lunged at her. She ran to her clothes, scooped them up, and raced through the woods toward home.

"Come back!" the surveyor bellowed. "Come back here with my money!"

Half an hour later, sitting inside her house, Annie Lou saw the truck come past with the three surveyors in the cab. The man called Frank stared at the Goode house, his face a mask of anger and frustration, and she felt a twist of fear. The truck disappeared down the road.

Once the men were gone, Annie Lou went out to the porch. She thought about Uncle Amos that night out in the barn, the way he had wanted her, risked Aunt Maggie's rage just to be with Annie Lou. The schoolteacher, giving her the best mark in class—and the surveyor, paying her money just to look at her body, giving her all the money he had.

"Annie Lou, where have you been all this time?" Her mother came around the house from the direction of the cornfield.

"I just went for a walk, Ma."

"We ain't got time for walks now. We got work to do."

"Sure, Ma."

She looked at her mother, and saw what the years of toil and deprivation had done to Esther Goode.



## MAN CRAZY

Neither welfare money nor their truck garden was adequate in itself—Esther had the humiliation of the one and the burden of the other. But, so easily, a girl could get the things she wanted. Annie Lou knew there was power in her body, not the power of working muscles, but power over men.

## Three

ANNIE LOU had seen the black Thunderbird down near the Crandall place off and on for a month. Sometimes there had only been the young man driving alone, other times there were two or three people with him. Since Lake Thomas had filled, more and more cars from Capital City were traversing the county roads, some of them pulling trailers with boats.

“Awful lot of houses going up all around the lake,” Susie said to her sister. “Imagine having a house in the city and one on the lake, too! Some people have a lot of money, don’t they! And they’ll be our neighbors. Seems queer.”

Annie Lou looked at her younger sister. Susie was fourteen now and she reminded Annie Lou a great deal of herself when she had been that age—the matured body, large firm breasts. Her hips were beginning to flare the same as Annie Lou’s had done. It would not be long before little Susie found out what life was all about. Annie Lou tried to imagine Susie with a man and giggled.

“What’s funny?” Susie said, giving her sister a puzzled look. When Annie Lou did not answer, she suggested, “Let’s go down to the lake for a swim.”

## MAN CRAZY

"I've got to help Ma."

"Come with me. We won't be gone long."

Annie Lou shook her head. She would have liked a swim. The day was hot and the lake would be cool and soothing. But Esther needed her, and Annie Lou felt sorry for her mother, who seemed so completely worn out, even though she was hardly forty.

"Well, I'm going," Susie said. "I'll see you later."

Later that afternoon when Susie came back from the lake she was aglow with excitement.

"I saw him, Annie Lou! I saw him!"

"You saw who?"

"The man who bought the Crandall place! He was down there this afternoon, right down there at the cove where we swim. He was walking around the edge of the cove and he stopped and talked to me!" Susie came up and sat on the porch in her wet bathing suit. "He's a real dream. His name's West, Peter West. Sounds like a movie star or something, doesn't it?"

"What's he going to do down there? Is he going to build a house?"

"Yes. He showed me where it's going to be and everything." She gave her sister a mischievous look. "He asked about you."

"Me? He doesn't even know me."

"That doesn't mean he hasn't seen you. He asked me if that pretty blonde was my sister—those were his exact words. That pretty blonde."

Annie Lou smiled. Susie babbled on. "And that's not all. He's going to have a speedboat when he builds his house and he said he'd take me for a ride if I wanted to go."

Still beaming and chattering, Susie went inside to change from the wet bathing suit. Annie Lou re-

## MAN CRAZY

mained on the porch, thinking of what her sister had told her. Strange that the man in the Thunderbird would have noticed anything at all about a broken-down old farmhouse, or anyone who lived in it. Of course, the boys at school had noticed her—and Uncle Amos—and the surveyor down by the hollow, but they were everyday. This man from Capital City, with a lot of money, and probably a beautiful wife who wore the latest fashions—why would he notice a country girl? And why would he ask about her, and say that she was pretty? That was the exact word Susie had said he used. “That pretty blonde.”

Hoppersville had been a scratch on the county map when Annie Lou was born. These days, with the city people coming in, Hoppersville had changed. There were two smart new shops in the village, for instance, one a haberdasher's, the other selling ladies' sportswear. The bank had a new facade.

Annie Lou guessed she could keep up with the town. If she really tried.

On Monday morning, a bulldozer arrived at the Crandall place. Trees toppled in a wide swath down the hillside between the old farmhouse and the cove. Peter West arrived at noon and spent half an hour talking to the operator of the machine.

He left without talking to any of the Goodes. But the next day he returned, and the day after as well, each time shortly after noon, not staying more than half an hour.

When the weekend came, Annie Lou reasoned, Peter West would not be in such a rush to return to Capital City.

The Thunderbird came past her house at noon on Saturday and went on toward the lake. Annie Lou changed quickly into her bathing suit, wishing

## MAN CRAZY

it were newer, maybe a bikini. She didn't wait for Susie to come along.

Above the cove she saw the parked car, but Peter West was nowhere in evidence. Annie Lou walked down the hillside on his raw new road and laid her towel on a fallen tree. She waded out slowly and began to swim across the cove. At the opposite shore she paused in shallow water, listening for footsteps in the quiet afternoon. There was only the distant sound of a motorboat somewhere beyond the bend.

She pushed into deeper water and floated on her back, gazing up at the clear blue sky and the tree-tops fringing the cove. She visualized Peter West standing by the shore, smiling at her, probably with a pipe clamped in one side of his mouth. Would he look at her as other men did? Would he show more restraint? She never had known city people really well.

As she drifted, her feet dropped to the soft lake bottom. She stood up, waist deep. Water streamed from her blonde hair. She fussed at her hair, paused when she heard someone coming down the hill. Suddenly tense, she wondered exactly what she would say to him, how she ought to act. Friendly? Disinterested? Curious?

"Hi, Annie Lou. You swimming all by yourself?" It was her brother, Billy. He had a cane pole over his shoulder and a tin can in one hand.

"Go somewhere else and do your fishing," she said peremptorily.

"Why? The fishing's good right here. That is, if you ain't scared all the fish off by splashing around."

Annie Lou beat the water with her hands. "There! That ought to get rid of them. Now you go chase them. Just get away from here."

## MAN CRAZY

"How come?" he said, sitting down on the bank. "You waiting for somebody?"

She ignored him. Curiosity would keep him waiting if she continued to talk to him. She stroked again into deeper water and paddled about. Finally her brother got to his feet and moved along the shore. Soon he was out of sight.

Annie Lou looked up at the hillside. Maybe Peter West wouldn't come down here after all. Maybe, from wherever he had gone, he would just come back to his car and drive off.

The day was hot and the water was cool and refreshing. But in five more minutes, if he failed to show up, she would go home. Her disappointment grew steadily keener. She had keyed herself up to the meeting, not considering that he might not arrive. She eased toward the shore, trying to maintain her resolve not to wait beyond the five minutes, and yet wanting to give him every opportunity. But again she reached the shallows only to find herself alone. She left the water, picked up the towel and began to dry herself. She felt angry at West for not coming, as though he had stood her up. She dried her hair and hung the towel over her shoulder.

"He didn't come, did he?" She looked around quickly to see Billy's grinning face peering out of the bushes at her.

"What are you talking about? I thought you were fishing some place."

He laughed irritatingly. "You was waiting for that guy that bought this place, weren't you? I saw you out there watching up the hill to see if he was coming."

"You mind your own business, Billy Goode!"

"He's an old man, sis. He must be thirty or thirty-

## MAN CRAZY

five years old. How come you're waiting around to see him?"

"I told you to mind your own business! Now get away from me!" She picked up a stick and flung it at him. It smacked him across the forehead and he fell back into the bushes with a cry of pain.

"That'll teach you to spy on me! Now get!"

Billy scrambled away, up the hillside. Annie Lou glared after him furiously.

"Little brothers are trying at times. I know. I had one myself."

She whirled at the sound of the voice and saw him standing a dozen steps away. He wore green slacks and a knit sport shirt with an alligator emblem on the left side of the chest. He was smiling at her.

Annie Lou was completely surprised. He had come down from the road without her hearing him, as if he had sneaked up on her. She wondered how much of her conversation with Billy he had overheard.

However, she maintained her composure. "Do you know Billy?"

West nodded. "If you start a project like this within ten miles of a small boy, it's inevitable that you meet him. A bulldozer will attract him like sugar attracts a fly."

Annie Lou returned the smile. "I suppose so. I really shouldn't have thrown the stick at him but there are times when Billy can't be reasoned with any other way."

"And this was one of them?"

"That's right."

He nodded. "And Susie is your sister, and little Carl your other brother?"

"You seem to know the whole family."

"All but you and your mother. I'm planning to

## MAN CRAZY

drop in on your mother one day soon. There's something I want to talk to her about."

"What on earth could you have to talk to Ma about?" Annie Lou asked in surprise.

"Oh, just a little business proposition," he said, shrugging the question off. "You must of course be Annie Lou."

She nodded.

"I'm Peter West."

"I know," she said without thinking. "I mean, I've seen you go by our house in your car. Susie told me she met you. She said you're building a house here on the cove."

"Yes. But I want you girls to go on using the cove for your swimming. If we're going to be neighbors, we ought to keep up good relations."

Annie Lou took the towel off her shoulder, feeling that it was obscuring a good view of her. "Where is your house going to be?"

"Come along and I'll show you," Peter West said. "That is, unless you're in a hurry. I see you've finished your swim."

"I'm not in a hurry."

"Good! Come on. It's a little way up the hill."

Annie Lou followed him up the incline, watching the lithe movement of his body as he made his way over rough terrain. He stopped and spread his hands. "Well, this is it. Of course, the ground will have to be graded and all that brush cleared away between here and the lake. I think the view will be fine."

Annie Lou turned and faced the lake. The view was somewhat hindered by undergrowth, but would be grand when the way was cleared. "It's wonderful," she said.



## MAN CRAZY

"I've got the house plans in the car if you'd like to see them."

"I'd like to very much."

The black Thunderbird was parked nearby, at the edge of the new road. West took a set of blueprints from the car and unrolled them on its long hood. He pointed and explained, but it was just so much gibberish to Annie Lou, who had never seen a blueprint before. Nevertheless, she evinced strong interest in it, wondering all the while at Peter West's seeming immunity to her. He talked on a strictly polite plane, with no personal allusions. Most disconcerting was that he seemed to take no notice whatever of her body, which she thought was pretty well displayed even in a bathing suit of not the latest style. From the look of him, he seemed as masculine and virile as anyone she had ever met.

"And that's about it," he finished, rolling the prints up. "What do you think of it?"

"I'm afraid most of it went over my head, but I'm sure it'll be lovely. Are you—are you and your wife going to live up here?"

"My wife? No, I'm afraid not. We're separated."

"I'm sorry," Annie Lou said politely. She felt rather glad. "You've got an awful lot of land just for one house."

"I'm going to develop it. I've got the waterfront property cut into eight lots. I've already got two of them sold and good prospects on three more."

"Then there'll be a kind of settlement here?"

"I hope so. I'm putting quite a bit of money into the thing. The road, electricity, water, it takes a lot."

"Is that what you do for a living?" she asked.

"To be perfectly frank with you I've never done

## MAN CRAZY

much of anything. My grandfather left me some money and I've tried my hand at different things. At the moment my main interest is this lake property."

Her already aroused interest took a new upturn. He was single—almost—good-looking and rich enough not to work.

"Are you going to move up here from Capital City?"

"No—but I'll spend quite a bit of my time here. I've optioned more lakefront property up toward Hoppersville, and another sizeable piece across the lake. I think this lakefront is in for a boom, especially with Capital City less than an hour's drive away, with people looking for ways to spend their leisure."

"When will you start your house?"

"The grading begins day after tomorrow. Shouldn't take long to finish if the weather doesn't turn sour."

Perhaps, Annie Lou thought, the land and house occupied his entire attention, subduing his earthier instincts. She never had known a man before to ignore her charms so long, and it chagrined her.

"Well," West said, "I've got to be getting back to the city. Can I give you a lift?"

"My bathing suit's still damp. I wouldn't want to hurt your upholstery."

"Nonsense! Besides, it isn't every day that I get to drive such a pretty girl home. Hop in."

She smiled at the compliment, mild though it was. Annie Lou dreamed about Peter West that night. In the dream he lived in a spired castle above the cove. He was dressed in silk slacks and wore a long triangular hat with a plume sticking out of the band. Instead of a white charger, he drove a long black Thunderbird. He came charging down the hillside

## MAN CRAZY

to the cove, waving a set of blueprints over his head, to rescue Annie Lou from a huge sea monster with the face of Uncle Amos. The serpent safely slain, her hero whisked her up the hill to his castle, where he tenderly laid her in a huge bed in a crystal room that magnificently fronted the lake. As she trembled in anticipation, he removed her wet, torn clothing, and dried her thoroughly with a towel. With brotherly affection, he kissed her on the forehead. "I'm still married," he said softly. He covered her with a silken sheet and tiptoed out of the room.

She awoke beating her fist into her pillow. Realizing she had been dreaming, she relaxed, stared thoughtfully at the ceiling. The explanation of Peter's reaction to her—or lack of reaction—was simple. She had been exposed only to the very direct approach. Uncle Amos, the boys in Hoppersville, the sex-starved high school teacher, the government man. None of them had had real finesse. Their demands were urgent, explosive. Peter West was different. If she went about it in the right way, this might be her chance to pull herself up in the world, to escape the squalor that had surrounded her all her life.

She left her bed and stood at the window in the slanting morning sun. Susie had already dressed and gone. Annie Lou, stretching languorously, let her nightgown drop to the bare floor. She breathed deeply, caressing her own body, her breasts and waist, the flare of her hips, her thighs. One day, she told herself, the hands of Peter West . . .

She dressed and went to the kitchen.

"Good morning, Ma."

"Are you going to church with us, Annie Lou?" Esther asked.

"I—" He would come back today. He would prob-

## MAN CRAZY

ably come in the morning and spend the whole day at the lake. "I don't think so, Ma. Not this Sunday. I've—I've got some things I want to do."

"This is the fourth Sunday in a row you haven't been to church. The preacher asked about you last time."

Annie Lou had not forgotten the preacher at her father's funeral, with Uncle Amos and Sam Lewis practically pouring him into his car. He was just another man, one who happened to work on Sunday.

"Tell him I'm sick," she said.

After breakfast was finished and the rest of the family had gone to church, Annie Lou put on her bathing suit and walked down the dirt road to the site of Peter West's. His car was not in evidence, and he had not actually said he was coming up today. She walked down the hill. The lake was calm, reflecting white summer clouds. Already, at nine o'clock, the day was turning hot. She waded into the cool water, swam across the cove and back to the small sand beach where she had left her towel. Still no sign of West. Maybe last night in the city he had gone to a party, or a night club, and stayed out very late.

She pushed back her hair with the towel. Yesterday he had appeared as if by magic, looking at her almost as he would have looked at Ma, or even Billy.

What if she took her suit off and stretched out on the towel as though taking a sunbath? If he came along and saw her, she was certain that more than conversation would ensue.

She smiled wickedly, hanging her suit from the branch of a small tree. She spread the towel and

## MAN CRAZY

stretched out on her stomach. Would it be better if she were on her back? She turned, looked up at the sky. Now she could wait. When he came she would act surprised, shy, embarrassed, but would give him a good long look. Something would have to happen.

For a long time she heard only the buzz of insects. Gradually she developed a feeling of being watched. The feeling was almost tangible, as though someone's eyes were caressing her unashamedly. Had he come without her hearing the car? Was he standing nearby, feasting his eyes on her, preparing to make his move? A shiver of anticipation went through her. She kept her eyes closed, waiting for him to speak. But no word came.

After a while, she had to open her eyes and look around.

Ten feet from shore, she saw two fishermen in a green boat. They were silent, grinning, staring.

She gave a little scream of surprise and grabbed the towel to cover herself.

One of the fishermen finally spoke. "Mighty pretty!" His voice held awe. "Yes, sir, mighty damn pretty!"

"You ain't just whistling Dixie!" agreed the other man, tilting his head and scratching his chin.

Annie Lou scooped her bathing suit off the limb as she backed away. In the protection of the bushes she scrambled into the still wet suit. The fishermen did not leave at once. Would they come ashore?

A voice rang out from the hillside above. "Hi, down there! Is that you, Annie Lou?"

Hastily, the fisherman started his electric trolling motor and the little boat moved away.

Annie Lou came out of the bushes. She saw Peter

## MAN CRAZY

West at the edge of his building site, smiling down at her.

She giggled and started up the hill.

Her wildest dreams were not yet to come true. Peter made pleasant conversation, then drove away alone to look at other sites he was interested in, along Lake Thomas' shores.

## Four

ON the following Saturday, Susie burst into the kitchen while Annie Lou was finishing the breakfast dishes. "It's him!" Susie cried excitedly. "It's Mr. West! He's right out there in the yard, and he's coming up to the door!"

Annie Lou stared at her sister, scarcely comprehending. All she could think of was the faded dress she had slipped on before breakfast. It was baggy and out of shape. She threw the dishrag to the floor and ran to the room she shared with Susie. Susie was at her heels. Just as she jerked the dress over her head there was a knock at the front door.

"Oh, God, why doesn't Ma answer?" Annie Lou asked in anguish.

"She must be in the outhouse."

"Then you go to the door! Let him in and get him a cup of coffee. I'll be out there in a minute."

"But—"

"No buts about it! Get out there, Susie, and let him in!"

Annie Lou yanked open the drawer of the rough, unpainted chest and snatched a pair of yellow shorts she had made from a magazine pattern. She found the halter that matched and dressed quickly. In the

## MAN CRAZY

other room she could hear Peter West's deep, polite voice. "Is your mother here, Susie?"

"She's—I mean, she'll be back in just a minute. Come on in and I'll get you a cup of coffee."

Facing the cracked mirror over the chest, Annie Lou ran a comb through her long blonde hair, arranging the waves to flow around her shoulders. After one final look of approval, she left her room.

"Well, good morning, Mr. West," she said, as if surprised to find him in the living room. "Is there anything we can do for you?" She walked across the room and was pleased to see that Peter West's eyes did not remain on her face.

"I want to talk to your mother." He moved in his chair and cleared his throat. Annie Lou smiled complacently. She had tried the sunsuit out on the workmen at West's house during the week. West's reaction to the suit seemed to be basically that of other men, except that he was more reserved. He did not whistle aloud.

"I'll go find Ma," she offered.

Susie came through the kitchen door with a coffee cup in her hand. "Never mind, Annie Lou, I already told her Mr. West was here. She'll be right along." She smiled shyly at their guest. "Here's your coffee."

"Thank you, Susie."

"Would you get me a cup too, please?" Annie Lou asked.

Susie frowned, shrugged and returned to the kitchen. Annie Lou watched Peter West sipping his coffee. He was someone from another world, and yet she felt completely comfortable with him, as if she had known him all her life. Or was it more than that? More as though she had been waiting just for



## MAN CRAZY

him, while everything else, for eighteen years, had served merely to pass the time until he arrived.

"How's the house coming along?" she said.

"On schedule. It should be finished in a couple of weeks."

Susie gave Annie Lou her coffee. The back screen door slapped shut. Esther appeared.

"Good morning, Mr. West," she said.

Annie Lou looked at her mother, at the thin shapeless dress over the thin shapeless body, and she suddenly wished that Esther would disappear. She was all that had been before, and she ought not to be here to spoil this fine morning.

West stood up and smiled. "I've got a little business proposition I'd like to talk over with you. Mrs. Goode."

Esther's look was one of desperate hopefulness. "Business? Me?" She sat and folded her hands in her lap, a gesture of acceptance. "You girls go on out," she said to Annie Lou and Susie.

"But, Ma—" Susie started.

"Mind me."

The two girls went to their bedroom. Annie Lou pushed Susie away from the door and put her ear to the crack.

West was saying, "Your place is on the only road leading down to my property, Mrs. Goode. Anyone who gets down there to my house, or the others that are going to be built, will either have to come past here, come in by water, or walk over the mountain. I'd like for you simply to keep an eye on the place for me. Naturally, I won't be up here all the time, and neither will any of the other owners. We'll arrange a salary for you, and if you think you'd be interested,

## MAN CRAZY

I'd also like to hire you as my housekeeper when I'm up here. How does it sound to you?"

"I—I don't know, Mr. West," Esther said. "There's not much I could do if anybody went down there to your place. It's ten miles into Hoppersville, and there ain't a telephone within a mile of our place."

"I'd have a phone put in here, Mrs. Goode. If you saw prowlers you could call the police in Hoppersville, or you could call me. There wouldn't really be any work to it and I'd pay you—say, fifty dollars a month just for watching. I could pay you by the day, or by the hour, for your duties as housekeeper."

"I—I do need the money," Esther said. "If you think I can do it all right, then I'd like to."

"Fine! I'll start your salary as of today."

Annie Lou felt things were taking a wrong direction. There was a difference between being neighbors—even if they were on different levels—and being employees. Maids, really.

She pushed her hand through her hair and opened the door.

"I'll talk to the telephone company today." West said to Esther. "I'd like the phone put in as soon as possible."

"You going down to the lake now?" Annie Lou asked him.

West nodded.

"Can I ride down with you? I'd like to see how your house is coming along."

"Annie Lou—" Esther started to admonish.

"Certainly," West said. "How about you, Susie?"

Annie Lou threw a meaningful glance at her sister and Susie shook her head. "I guess not right now."

"What about the boys?"

## MAN CRAZY

"They lit out right after breakfast," Esther told him. "They went fishing."

As she left the house at Peter West's side, Annie Lou knew she was being watched from the front window.

At West's house, which seemed miraculously close to completion, they parked beside a pickup truck.

Through the back door, they entered a huge modernistic kitchen. A workman was putting finishing touches on the cabinets. He did a double-take when he saw Annie Lou, but she moved past him as if he did not exist.

Sliding glass doors had been installed at the living room entrance. They extended across the entire front, giving an unhindered view of the cove and the lake beyond.

"It's a beautiful view, Peter!" She turned quickly. "I mean, Mr. West. I'm sorry."

He smiled. "That's my name. Peter."

"Well, I shouldn't call you by your first name. It's just that—I don't know exactly how to explain it, but it seems to me that I've known you for so much longer than I really have. It seems that I have known you all my life. Do you understand what I mean?" She moved nearer him till a scarce half yard separated them. All the workmen were elsewhere in the house—they were alone in the room.

He looked into her face, and after what seemed to Annie Lou an interminable pause, gently grasped her arms. With a soft pressure, almost as if it were completely against his will, he pulled her toward him. Annie Lou closed her eyes, expecting the touch of his lips on hers.

"Mr. West. Oh, excuse me."

## MAN CRAZY

Annie Lou's eyes popped open and she looked to her left toward the sound. A thin unshaven individual in overalls stood there with a hammer dangling from one hand. He was grinning at her.

"Well, what is it?" West said impatiently, releasing Annie Lou.

"Got something back here you oughta take a look at before we go on. See if this is the way you want it. That is, if you got time right now."

West ignored the remark and strode across the room. He and the carpenter disappeared through a doorway. Annie Lou clenched her fists at her sides and muttered a phrase she had learned long ago from her father. "That country son of a bitch." She moved to the glass doors and stared out unseeing at the panoramic view of Lake Thomas. The country sons of bitches, all of them, would try to keep her from rising to Peter West's level. But she would fool them.

Peter West's house was finished, and two others well under way. One—just north of West's and almost within sight of the old Crandall place, was being built by a man named Jake Carson. A stock broker in Capital City, he was a small man with a nervous smile and a large matronly wife.

The other house had been started by one Ashley Murray, a quiet, intense bank official, also from Capital City. His house would occupy the lot between Carson's and West's, and apparently would be smaller and less ostentatious than either.

Two lots to the south of West's house had been optioned, and West had told Annie Lou that he had good prospects on the remaining three lakefront sites.

Considering who her new neighbors would be,

## MAN CRAZY

Annie Lou sat on the front porch reading a fashion magazine.

A dusty pickup truck pulled up at the edge of the road. Sam Lewis climbed out and headed across the yard. "Morning, Annie Lou!" he called out.

"Good morning, Sam." She looked past him at the truck. "What have you got out there?"

"I'm doing a barbecue for one of your neighbors. Guy named West. That's my charcoal and equipment." He put one foot on the porch step. "There oughta be more'n enough meat for this shindig. Thought I might drop off some for you all on my way back."

"That's mighty nice of you, Sam. You say Mr. West is having a party?"

"Yeah. Be probably twenty or thirty folks all told. I'm cooking a pig. That's my specialty!" He grinned.

"Next to corn whiskey?"

Lewis laughed. "Yeah, next to corn whiskey. Say, Annie Lou." He scratched his chin and stepped up onto the porch. "How about going to the dance in Hoppersville with me tomorrow night?"

"Why, Mr. Lewis! What would folks say? You're old enough to be my Pa!"

"I ain't that old! Just because I used to do business with your old man you think I'm old as he was!"

Angrily, Esther came out to the porch. "You run along, Sam Lewis! Find yourself an old enough woman and leave Annie Lou be!"

Lewis backed down to the yard, still grinning. "Sure thing, Esther." He looked at Annie Lou. "I'll bring some of that pig meat around tonight when I leave." He drove away.

Cars began arriving by two that afternoon. From the front porch Annie Lou saw a long gray Cadillac

## MAN CRAZY

go by with Mr. Carson erect behind the wheel and his wife far at the other side, unsmiling as always. The windows were rolled shut, and Annie Lou could imagine the coolness of the air-conditioned interior.

Half an hour later Ashley Murray passed with his wife. Mrs. Murray was facing her husband, her mouth moving rapidly. Murray, sad-eyed as an old hound dog, stared ahead and listened. The car turned down the lake drive. More people passed. An unfamiliar blue Chrysler slowed and stopped at the Goode house. The driver rolled his window down and leaned out.

"I'm looking for a fellow by the name of West. Pete West. Know where his place is?"

Annie Lou stood up and walked toward him. She saw the bored expression on the man's florid face change to a bright look of discovery. He smiled as she neared the car. When she spoke, he took off his hat.

"Mr. West's place is right down there," Annie Lou said, pointing. "You just take a right at that old farmhouse and you can't miss it."

"Well, that's just fine! So you're a neighbor of Pete's, eh? My name's Townsend. John Townsend." He waved a hand at the woman beside him. "This is Mrs. Townsend, Miss—"

"I'm Annie Lou Goode."

"Well, now, we're very pleased to meet you, Annie Lou Goode."

"Come on, John," Mrs. Townsend said in a flat, blurry, vaguely cultured voice. She tilted the rear-view mirror and began applying lipstick. Her hand was unsteady and when she was done her lips were a mess. "John, quit ogling the little mountain lassie and let's go." She dropped the lipstick into her hand-

## MAN CRAZY

bag, from which she brought out a half pint bottle of whiskey. She took a small swallow.

Townsend, smiling straight at Annie Lou's breasts, ignored his wife's rudeness. "Thank you again for the directions, Miss Goode. We'll be seeing you."

"Down, boy," said Mrs. Townsend. "You've got your directions. If you want to, come back later and try your luck. But first take me some place where there's a bar and a bathroom."

Townsend pulled his gear shift down, smiled weakly again at Annie Lou and moved away.

By three o'clock six more cars had gone past the Goode house on the road to Peter West's.

"Don't you wish we were going to the party, Annie Lou?" Susie said.

"Shut up," Annie Lou snapped.

"What did I say?" The younger girl looked hurt.

"Just leave me alone, will you?"

With a shrug, Susie walked away.

Annie Lou stared down the road. Between her and the party down there stood an entire world. She had known all her life that the other world existed, inhabited by people who used the country for a playground, who wore beautiful clothes and got cleverly drunk on fancy liquor, instead of boringly bestial on moonshine. She wanted to be a part of that better world.

She picked up the magazine and tried to interest herself once more, but her eyes kept wandering down toward the lake. Finally, she threw the magazine aside and went indoors.

"I reckon we'll have a lot of cleaning up to do down at Mr. West's place tomorrow," Esther said.

"I won't do it, Ma."

Esther turned in shock. "What was that you said?"

## MAN CRAZY

"I won't do it. I won't be his—his servant!"

"Annie Lou, you know we need the money. If we don't do like Mr. West said he'll get somebody else."

"I won't! Susie will help you, and Billy and Carl, but I can't do it, Ma! I just can't!" She went to her room, threw herself on her bed and stared up at the ceiling.

Her mother appeared at the door. "I don't understand you," Esther said in a troubled voice.

"There's nothing to understand, Ma. I'll stay here tomorrow, do all the chores. I'll clean up the house, I'll do anything, but I won't go down to his place and work like a maid."

Esther came to the edge of the bed and touched her daughter's hair. "Annie Lou, these people are different from us. They was raised different and they live different. They ain't our kind—you have to remember that."

Annie Lou leaned on her elbow. "Do you want me to be like you, Ma? Do you want me to be an old worn-out woman long before my time, just because I'm our kind? Well, that's not what I want! I want pretty clothes and a big long air-conditioned car and a house on the lake and money and—" She turned and buried her face in the pillow.

"You better listen to me, Annie Lou," Esther said firmly. "Just because them people live down the road don't make them any closer than they were before. You'd do well to get your mind off what you're thinking about."

Annie Lou said nothing, and after a few seconds Esther started from the room.

"Ma?"

Esther turned.



## MAN CRAZY

“Ma, I’m—I’m sorry for what I said about you just now. I didn’t mean it.”

Esther smiled sadly, nodded, and left the room. When her mother had gone, Annie Lou walked slowly to the window. She should not have struck out at Esther the way she had. In her discontent Annie Lou had wanted to hurt someone, and Esther had been handy.

But one thing still was certain, she told herself with passion. When she next went down to Peter West’s, it would not be to clean his house.

## Five

BY six that evening, Annie Lou could bear no more. The party still must be going on—she had seen no cars leaving. Unobserved, she went down the road.

Behind West's house, the parking area was crowded with shiny automobiles, among which Sam Lewis's truck stood out like something borrowed from a junk yard. She paused beside the Carsons' Cadillac.

In the late afternoon sun a speedboat on the lake threw a golden spray far out. From the far side of the house came sounds of music, laughter, the tinkle of glasses. The air was fragrant with Sam's barbecue. Annie Lou, beside the long Cadillac, watched, listened, dreamed. She put out one hand and slowly brushed her fingers along the finish of the car. None of this seemed real. She might have been in a movie theater, watching scenes of some never-never land, peopled with characters from someone's imagination. Yet her hand was on the car. The boat was out on the water, and the people down on the terrace were flesh and blood. And across the hill and up the road was an unpainted tumble-down shack which she called home.

She heard a sound. Before she could turn two

## MAN CRAZY

arms circled her in a tight grip. "Gotcha! Yes, ma'am, I caught you, didn't I?"

Heart pounding she squirmed, trying to turn, but the arms squeezed tighter.

"What were you doing out here?"

"I wasn't doing anything! I was—I was just watching."

"You sure that's all you were doing? Maybe you were waiting for somebody to meet you here. Yeah, I bet that's it!"

"No, honest. I was just watching the party."

The grip loosened. She turned around, still in the circle of arms and pressed back against the Cadillac's side. She recognized John Townsend, tried to duck and escape. He grabbed her wrist.

"Hey!" He grinned. "You're as scared as a little rabbit! Honey, I won't hurt you. Come on and join the party. You're just what this lousy party needs—youth and beauty. Come on!"

"No, no! I couldn't do that!"

"Why not? I'm inviting you."

"But— but—"

"I won't go back without you. I'll stay right here and hold you until it thunders. Why don't you want to come?"

"I'm not—I don't have the right kind of clothes."

Townsend tipped his head and let his eyes wander. "Honey, you just believe one who knows about such things. It's not what you have on that counts, it's what you have underneath. Besides, that little outfit is very nice."

"But it's Mr. West's party," Annie Lou protested. "He might not want me there."

Townsend laughed, released his grip.

## MAN CRAZY

"If West doesn't want you there, then he isn't the man I thought."

"Well—maybe." Unconsciously, she let her hands go down her body, smoothing at the tight shorts.

"Ready?" Townsend asked.

"I'm nervous. Are you sure it's all right for me—"

"Calm down." Townsend smiled, extending his hands. "You look great, Annie Lou. The only thing that's going to be out of joint when you show up will be the other dames!"

Annie Lou touched her hair. "I'm ready," she said.

Townsend took her arm and brought her into the house by the back door. She had been here many times but tonight the house seemed different. In the kitchen, a small group stopped talking, just to turn and look at Annie Lou. A young man in the group grinned and adjusted his tie.

"Pardon us, gentlemen," Townsend said. They went past the frankly staring group into the living area. People stood around, some in bathing suits, and each with a glass in hand. Annie Lou's gaze fell on Peter West, who stood near the glass-paneled front of the room carrying on an earnest conversation with an elderly man.

"Would you like a coke, Annie Lou?" Townsend asked her.

She took her eyes off West, looked inquiringly at Townsend, as if she had not heard him speak.

"A coke," he repeated. "Or a ginger ale."

She wanted to be like the others. "Can I have something a little stronger than ginger ale?"

Townsend's eyebrows rose but he nodded. "Coming right up! Don't go away. You wait right here for me."

He moved toward the bar. Before he had gone

## MAN CRAZY

three steps, Annie Lou felt someone touch her arm.

"Hello, there."

She recognized the small man, though she had not personally met him until now. "Hello, Mr. Carson," she said.

A look of pleasure brightened his face. "You know me?"

Annie Lou nodded. "That's a very nice house you're building. I've been to see it a few times."

"Well, now! I'm glad you like it. Is your family buying one of West's lots?"

"No. I—I live near here."

"Oh, Your family has already built."

Suddenly she did not want to be ashamed of what she was, nor of her family. "My family was here for quite a while before the lake came, Mr. Carson. Did you notice a little house on your left just before the last turn?" She watched his expression of surprise. "That's right, Mr. Carson. The little shack with the chinaberry tree in the yard and the outhouse near the barn. That's where I live."

"Oh. I see—" He pulled back his hand and massaged his throat, then lifted his cocktail and took a deep drink. "I—well, this party was a sort of promotional thing as well as a housewarming, and I—"

In an access of compassion, Annie Lou said, "I'm sorry if I embarrassed you."

Townsend came back with two glasses. He smiled at Carson. "I see you've met Annie Lou." He handed her one of the glasses. "Let's see how you like this."

Annie Lou sipped the drink. It tasted like lemonade. She suddenly realized she was very thirsty and she took a longer swallow.

"Better watch that stuff, Annie Lou. It'll fool you."

"It's good. What is it?"

## MAN CRAZY

"A Tom Collins."

"You mean you've given this—this child—a Tom Collins?" Carson asked.

"It's what she wanted." Townsend grinned. "Coming from you, Jake, that's a good one!"

"Just what the devil is that supposed to mean?" Carson, bristling, looked like a little bantam rooster.

Townsend, obviously enjoying the little joust, made a motion with his head. "My advice is to clam up, Jake. Here comes your wife."

Carson glanced quickly in the direction Townsend had indicated. Annie Lou saw the large woman heading toward them, like a steamboat down a channel.

"Excuse me, please." Carson quickly moved toward his wife.

"Scared to death of her," Townsend said. "But it doesn't stop him."

"What do you mean? Doesn't stop him from what?"

"Never mind. Here's our host."

Peter West did not seem the least put out to find Annie Lou at the party.

"You've seen the thing right from the beginning," he said. "What do you think of the finished product?"

"The house? I think it's lovely." She gave him a shy look. "You must think I'm pretty terrible breaking in this way."

Townsend was quick to her defense. "I did it, Petel! I thought this beautiful young creature might shed a little light in this collection of fuddy-duddies. I practically had to drag her in."

West said, "Now that you're here, promise me you'll stay. He's absolutely right, you do add life to the party."

Annie Lou felt a thrill of pleasure, even if he did not mean the words. "I'll stay."

## MAN CRAZY

“Good! Now if you two will excuse me, there are people I must talk to.”

Annie Lou stared after him thoughtfully. “Mr. Townsend,” she asked, sipping her drink, “do you know his—do you know Mrs. West?”

“Donna? I’ve met her briefly. She’s a gorgeous woman, but—well, somewhat calculating.” He changed the subject. “Here comes another of your neighbors-to-be.”

A huge red-haired man paused at Annie Lou’s side.

“This is Ed Lyle,” Townsend made introductions. “Ed’s a doctor, and I’m certain he would be most happy to thump on you any time you don’t feel well. Ed, Miss Annie Lou Goode.” Townsend winked at the doctor and said in a stage whisper, “Annie Lou’s a neighbor. Lives right down the street!”

“I’m pleased to meet you, Annie Lou,” Lyle acknowledged.

Annie Lou smiled, at last feeling strangely confident.

Sarah Townsend appeared, a half-filled glass in her hand. In her drunken smile, Annie Lou read something other than friendliness. Eyes on Annie Lou, Sarah addressed her husband. “Presenting your little wild flower to society, John? Makes this a sort of coming out party, doesn’t it?” Unexpectedly, she reached for the halter of Annie Lou’s sunsuit. “And speaking of coming out, I wouldn’t be at all surprised. At the drop of a hat, or maybe at the drop of a two-dollar bill?”

Townsend grabbed his wife’s arm roughly, causing her drink to slosh over. He pulled her away, muttering in her ear, leaving Lyle and Annie Lou to themselves.

## MAN CRAZY

"Sarah can be caustic at times, Annie Lou," the doctor said. "Cynicism is her weapon, and whiskey is her crutch."

Annie Lou stared after the Townsends. She was not entirely certain of Lyle's meaning, but to her the little incident boiled down to one thing only. Jealousy. Mrs. Townsend was jealous of little Annie Lou Goode, and her fear was so great that she had tried to shame Annie Lou.

"I don't mind," Annie Lou said. "I know how old women are. Ma—my mother is like that. You just have to smile and try to understand them."

Lyle threw back his head and laughed. "If Sarah could have heard that! That's the one thing there's no defense against—age!" He touched her arm. "I think I'll enjoy being a neighbor of yours, Annie Lou."

His hand lingered. Annie Lou, smiling, held out her empty glass. "I'd like another drink, please."

Lyle reluctantly took his hand away and accepted the glass. "What was it you were drinking?"

"It was a Tom Collins."

The doctor looked surprised, but he nodded and moved away. Annie Lou looked about her for Peter West. He was the real reason she was here, though even in her own mind she was not fully aware of why she felt as she did.

Townsend came back. "We're going for a boat ride," he said. "Come along."

"Who's going?" she asked.

"About half a dozen people, I don't know exactly who. Why do you ask?" He tilted his head and his eyes narrowed. He gave her a sly smile. "You looking for somebody in particular?"

"No. I just wondered."



## MAN CRAZY

"Coming along?"

"I—I think I'll wait. Dr. Lyle has gone for my drink."

The party continued to gather steam as the empties piled higher under the bar. Couples disappeared toward the parking area, or into the woods, or the back rooms of the house. At one point Annie Lou stepped into the darkness at the edge of the terrace and found Sarah Townsend in a passionate embrace. But not with Mr. Townsend.

The whole party was becoming an education to Annie Lou. It was as if an idol had fallen, when she saw these people behave as they did. They were no different from the people she knew. The surroundings were different. The clothes, the talk, the whiskey were more expensive. But the people were the same.

"I'd like to talk to you, Annie Lou." Jacob Carson took her arm and steered her toward the terrace.

"I was just about to go home, Mr. Carson."

They reached the edge of the shadows and Carson stopped. His hand moved to her waist, and then dropped to her hip.

"Mr. Carson—"

"Wait—hear me out first!" His voice was thick, and he swayed on his feet slightly. "My dear child, I have been beside myself ever since you first came into view. Never in my entire life have I seen a woman who could compare with you. Never!" His right hand clamped on her other hip. He pulled her to him in a tight frantic grasp. "Anything you want, Annie Lou, anything your heart desires! You name it and it is yours! I'll do anything for you—"

She twisted out of his grasp. "You're drunk, Mr. Carson! You don't know what you're saying!"

"I know exactly what I'm saying! I want you! I want you!" He raised his arm unsteadily but drama-

## MAN CRAZY

tically. For a fleeting instant he looked exactly like the pictures of Uncle Sam in recruiting posters outside the post office in Hoppersville.

He lurched at her, and she side-stepped out of his way. She reached the road and paused. Everything was swaying. The Tom Collins suddenly had taken effect. Music still played.

Someone was at her side, she realized in the next moment, who had not been there before. "Why, Annie Lou," he said, "you're tipsy!"

She wanted the man to be Peter West, with his gentle concerned manner, his courteous reserve that she found so hard to penetrate. Thoughts like stabs of light went through her brain, disconnected, yet bearing on one another. The better life she envisioned, of ease and manners and expansive views—it existed, it still existed, even if all these people were no better than the Goodes and the Lewises and the other natives of Hoppersville. These party people—not good enough for their own lives. Peter West—more than good enough.

But the man in the shadows beside her was not Peter West, He was Johnny Townsend. She stared at him with sad alcoholic wisdom. "You look like somebody else," she said. "You look like my Uncle Amos." She added fuzzily, as he laughed uproariously—though she had not meant to be funny—and assaulted her cheeks and throat and breasts with clumsy kisses, "You shouldn't. You really shouldn't. Sarah—your wife—you shouldn't. But you're going to, aren't you? I can't help myself. All dizzy—"

She knew that he lifted her, carried her off while her brain whirled and blazing pinwheels exploded somewhere behind her eyes. Her consciousness came and went—she tried not to black out.

## MAN CRAZY

She was with him in his car, in the wide back seat, and his weight was crushing her breath. He reminded her more than ever of Uncle Amos.

She had been a fool, she thought, to accept those two drinks—she would never again be the same kind of fool. But one thing was proved—the men were the same, whatever world you entered. Men wanted Annie Lou, and next time, she would make them serve her purpose—just as she had made a school-teacher serve her purpose, long ago.

She had a bittersweet sense of pleasure—it was Peter West she wanted, not this mass of lust that panted above her. The pleasure dimmed as she blacked out briefly again—she wanted to sleep, she desperately longed to expire with the bursting pin-wheels. A thrust of joy shot through her before all the shooting lights went out and she murmured a name, not caring whether or not John Townsend heard it.

“Peter—Peter—so sleepy and tired—”

Later, she awoke, still awkwardly sprawled in the Chrysler's back seat. John Townsend snored beside her. She studied him with amused contempt. The night had turned dark and quiet, but there was a moon. Her skimpy little sunsuit made two splashes of cloth on the floor of the car. He had stripped her, apparently, and used her. She squirmed quickly into her clothes, her head cleared by sleep, and left the car and the storybook world she had visited for an evening. Never again, she thought, would she feel any awe whatever for the newcomers at the lake. Any time she wanted to, she could be one of them, partake of their way of life. And she wanted to.

Only Peter West still seemed beyond attainment. She headed toward home in the warm summer night.

## Six

THE morning after Peter West's housewarming, Annie Lou lay in bed pretending to be asleep as Susie dressed.

"I know you're awake, Annie Lou," the younger girl said. "And I know what you told Ma about not helping out today. You think you're better than the rest of us, don't you? Just because Mr. West said you were pretty! Well, that just shows that Mr. West needs glasses."

Unable to take the taunts, Annie Lou flung her pillow at Susie.

Encouraged, Susie went on. "Miss High Society! Went down to Mr. West's party yesterday! I'll bet all those city folks just laughed up their sleeves at you and that dinky little old sunsuit of yours!"

"Shut your mouth!" Annie Lou jumped out of bed. Laughing unpleasantly Susie slipped out of the room. Annie Lou picked up her pillow and went back to bed. She thought about the party. A smile stole over her face. As far as she was concerned, the affair had been a success—as far as it went.

The door opened slightly and Esther looked in. "You coming to work with us at Mr. West's?"

Annie Lou turned away. "No. Ma, I told you. Any-

## MAN CRAZY

thing but that. You all go on and I'll clean up here. I'll cook. I'll do the wash and mending."

"You think about it, child. Don't let yourself get hurt."

Annie Lou said nothing. She lay still for a long while after she heard the door shut, wondering why Esther could not see her reasons. How could she go to a party one day and become the cleaning woman the next? She was certainly not lazy. By the time they returned from West's she would have the house in order and the chores done.

She let her gaze wander to the faded and patched curtains, and contrasted them with the drapes she imagined in Peter West's bedroom. There was a need within everyone to better himself, there had to be. How could you see things you did not have without wanting them? How could you be raised to the heights for a moment and then be thrown back to the status of an animal?

She lowered her feet to the bare floor, and pulled her nightgown over her head. Her hands touched her naked breasts, then moved down to her thighs. Townsend had not harmed her. Perhaps, if anything, he had taught her a needed lesson.

She heard a car on the road and looked out. Carson, sitting alone was driving very slowly past the house in his long Cadillac. Fifty feet away, the car stopped and backed and stopped again near the chinaberry tree.

She dressed quickly in shorts and halter and went out. When he saw her, Carson opened the door and got out. He took another long look in the direction of the lake and then walked rapidly across the yard to the porch.

"Good morning, Annie Lou," he said. He came up

## MAN CRAZY

onto the porch, then he pointed one hand down toward the lake. "I just saw your mother and the other children on their way to West's house."

"Ma does Mr. West's cleaning," Annie Lou said, mildly defiant.

He nodded. "And the children help out. That's very nice."

"All but me. I'm not a servant, Mr. Carson."

"I admire pride in a girl. A great deal of a woman's charm lies in her pride." Worriedly, briefly, he looked down the road over his shoulder, then turned back to Annie Lou. "As I told you last night, you are a very attractive young lady. You have—in addition to your pride—certain, er, attributes." He moved forward stiffly. "I could do a great deal for someone like you. I have money, Annie Lou. I have position and influence. You see that car sitting out there? I buy a brand new one every year. I could put beautiful clothes on you, my dear. Jewels, anything you wanted would be yours—"

"Mr. Carson," Annie Lou said quietly. "What would I have to do for all these things you would give me? I never got anything free in my whole life."

Again he moved forward, and this time he reached for both her hands. He was trembling slightly and his face wore a frozen smile. "I'm offering you a job," he explained. "A well-paying, interesting job in Capital City—as my personal hostess. A business man has to entertain, you know, and Edna—my wife—well, she's not the perfect person for it. So I have another apartment—really, almost a club—where I entertain business friends—but the place needs a gracious touch. A beautiful woman—you would live there, and handle the small office matters I keep there—and it all would be most respectable, I promise.

## MAN CRAZY

You would be working for me as a public relations assistant—and I could pay you, in addition to the use of the apartment, and the cost of maintaining it, about five thousand dollars a year. How does that sound, Annie Lou?”

He looked old enough to be her grandfather, she thought. “It sounds,” she said mildly, “like there’s a catch to it. You’d have a key to that apartment, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes,” he said, “and you would be nice to me.” Suddenly he paled. “Would you give me a cup coffee, child? I’m not strong today.”

She beckoned him into the house. Carson took a seat on the swaybacked sofa and Annie Lou went to the kitchen. She poured two cups from the coffee pot on the stove and brought them back to the living room.

“Thank you, my dear,” Carson said. He patted the sofa beside him. “Sit here.”

She hesitated, then sat down.

“You’ve lived here all your life?”

“Most of it,” she said.

“You would like to live better than this, wouldn’t you, Annie Lou?”

She sipped her coffee and let her eyes wander over the shabby room. It was suddenly very depressing.

“I can change all this for you if you’ll just let me.” He put his cup aside and laid his hand on Annie Lou’s knee. His hand felt hard and bony. The hand remained there for half a minute, the fingertips moving in a small tight circle. “Your skin is soft. So very soft.” His voice caught and he cleared his throat.

“I don’t think you should do that, Mr. Carson,” Annie Lou said.

“I’m old. How long would you have to be nice to

## MAN CRAZY

me? And after I'm gone, there you'd be, an established, successful, glamorous woman with a career—money—clothes." His hand moved an inch up Annie Lou's thigh, then another inch. His flesh felt like cold parchment against her, and yet she did not move.

"Wouldn't you like that, Annie Lou?" he continued. "No more scrubbing and cleaning. Charge accounts in the good stores."

"It sounds nice, Mr. Carson."

"Then it's settled?" His hands moved suddenly up to the edge of her shorts and the tips of his fingers slipped under the cloth. Still Annie Lou did not answer him. "You want to think about it, child? Is that why you don't answer me? Well, you're certainly entitled to give it some thought. I would be the last person to try to pressure you into an arrangement that did not suit you one hundred percent."

She found herself suddenly wondering what Mr. Carson looked like with his clothes off, and the image she conjured brought a mischievous smile to her face.

"You're smiling," he said. "Does that mean you like the idea?"

"I don't understand you, Mr. Carson. Why would you want me to have this important job—when I have no business experience?"

He composed himself. "I like beauty, my dear. I pride myself in being surrounded only by that which is fine and good and beautiful. I have paintings in my home, paintings which have cost me a fortune. I am a connoisseur of beauty and I have found it a tremendous asset. And you are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. Beautiful. Exquisite." He groped at her with both hands, and his knee knocked the half-full coffee cup to the floor.



## MAN CRAZY

"Please, Annie Lou!" he begged. "You shall have anything you want! Anything!"

She pushed his thin arm away and stood up, smoothing her clothes. Carson, still sitting on the sofa, had developed an audible wheeze. Annie Lou picked up his cup. "Would you like some more coffee, Mr. Carson?"

"Please give me an answer—"

"Coffee?"

He opened his mouth, then closed it and nodded. Annie Lou went to the kitchen and refilled Carson's cup. He accepted it with shaking hands and took a deep swallow of the hot liquid.

"Forgive me, my dear," he said at last. "I'm afraid I was carried away. It sometimes happens when I see something I want very badly, as I want you." He took another swallow of his coffee, and his hands seemed to grow steadier.

"I don't think I like the idea of being—being bought," Annie Lou said. "That's what it amounts to, doesn't it? Even if a job goes with it?"

He smiled ruefully. "In my younger days I would not have dreamed of such a thing. But I am certainly realistic enough to know that I cannot offer what a young man can. So I offer what most younger men lack—wealth. Position."

Annie Lou resumed her seat on the sofa, though out of Carson's reach. "What would your wife think about this arrangement of yours?"

"My wife? Edna?" He chuckled. "Edna has her little pastimes. I know all about Edna. There's a young portrait artist—well, that's another story." He took a small metal object from his pocket. "I'd like you to have this. It's a camera, a miniature camera. And it's no toy, it's a precision instrument."

## MAN CRAZY

He forced the gift into her hands.

"No strings attached. Just a little present from me to you," he said.

"But I—I don't need a camera. Besides, I wouldn't know how to work it."

Carson smiled. "Nobody needs a camera, except a professional photographer. All one needs is food, clothing, and shelter. But it's the little extras that make life interesting. As for operating it, I'll show you how myself."

"In the apartment in Capital City?" Annie Lou asked with a smile.

Carson nodded. "Preferably."

"Maybe you'd better take your present back, Mr. Carson. I'm afraid I'm not interested in your offer."

He moved toward the door. "You keep it, Annie Lou. As for my—my offer, it will remain open indefinitely. All I ask is that you give it some thought." He looked around at the room meaningfully. "Your entire way of life could be changed for the better."

His eyes dropped briefly to her breasts. He smiled again and left. Annie Lou watched the long Cadillac turning around in the yard, and moving back toward the lake.

By the time Esther and the children came back from West's place Annie Lou had the house thoroughly cleaned. She had made an extra special effort which did not go unnoticed by her mother. "It's good to come back to a tidy house. I thank you, Annie Lou," Esther conceded, settling in her kitchen chair with a cup of coffee. "I thought your Pa could drink whiskey," she added. "But I never saw the likes of the bottles down there at Mr. West's place this morning."

## MAN CRAZY

"Is he—is Mr. West down there now?" Annie Lou said.

"Yes he's down there. But what is it to you?"

"Nothing, Ma." Annie Lou said defensively. "I just asked. He said he would take me to ride in his speedboat today. Yesterday he was too busy."

"Annie Lou, you would be wise to think about what you're doing. Those people are not our kind—"

"For God's sake, Ma, you've been over this!" She stopped herself, stood up. "I'm sorry." She went to the porch and looked down toward the lake. She knew she was the equal of any of the people she had seen at Peter West's party, and in some ways, better. She was a lot prettier, and her figure was all hers and not a lot of foam rubber and padding. She smiled, thinking of Carson sniffing around with his presents and his promises of a glamorous job in the city and all the rest. If she was worth all that to him, then she certainly must have some worth to Peter West.

She glanced back toward the family—Esther was saying something to Susie in the kitchen, probably about Annie Lou and her rights as an eighteen-year-old. She walked down the porch steps and headed for Peter West's.

On the way she passed Carson's nearly completed house. There were two workmen on the roof. One nudged the other, and pointed. Both men smiled broadly and stopped their work. Annie Lou ignored them. But she could not ignore the woman who called to her from the unfinished rear doorway. Edna Carson wore tapered slacks. They made her hips look enormous.

"May I speak to you for a moment, Miss Goode?" she asked.

## MAN CRAZY

Annie Lou walked toward her.

Edna Carson tapped a paint chart against the palm of her left hand. "This concerns Jacob. Or Jake, as you probably call him. My husband. Surely by this time he's offered you the apartment and all that goes with it?"

"I—"

Edna Carson nodded knowingly. "Of course he has. Won't you come in my dear?"

Perplexed, Annie Lou followed her into the house.

"I'm sorry I can't offer you a chair, but these nail-kegs are the best I have at the moment."

"I'll stand," Annie Lou said. "I'd like to know what you want."

"I want you to keep away from my husband. I may not look very formidable, but I've dealt before with more than one of Jacob's nasty little sluts—"

"You've got no right to talk to me like this!"

"Oh? Then you are one of his sluts! He always was a fast worker. Take my advice, young woman—keep away from Jacob Carson! Oh, keep whatever little trinkets he's tried to bait you with, but let that be the last of it, do you understand me?"

Annie Lou felt her heart roaring inside her. At first she could hardly speak, but when she did, the words came in a torrent. "You are absolutely right, Mrs. Carson! Your husband made me an offer! There was no limit to what he said he would do for me, and do you know why? I'll tell you! It's because he cannot stand the thought of climbing into bed with a pig like you! And I'll tell you something else, I would not have your husband for all the money in the world! He put his hands on me and my skin crawled! He is nothing but a filthy old man!" She took a step toward Edna Carson, and the woman backed away

## MAN CRAZY

with a startled expression on her face. "And you, Mrs. Carson, are a filthy old woman!"

She whirled. Standing in the doorway with their mouths open were three workmen. They stared at Annie Lou and then into the room as if expecting a corpse on the barely finished floor. One of the men grinned and said, "Whew!" as Annie Lou breezed past them.

The only car still parked behind his house was Peter West's black Thunderbird. Annie Lou pushed his back doorbell button. When no one answered, she tried the door, and found it unlocked, and went in. The house was as neat as a pin. She felt a little pang of guilt at not having helped Esther and the others clean the place.

"Mr. West?" she called out. There was no answer. She walked through the house to the terrace in front. The cove below was smooth though farther out on the lake a breeze rippled the water. She saw West down at his boathouse.

"Hello there," she called, starting down the path.

He looked up from the speedboat, smiled. "Hi. Know anything about engines?"

"Afraid not." She joined him on the catwalk beside the boat. She peered at the engine under the open hatch.

"Well, it's nothing serious. Just thought I'd tune it up." He turned something with his screwdriver.

"Are you mad at me for coming to your party yesterday?" she said.

"Of course not! I would have asked you to begin with if I'd thought you'd enjoy that wacky bunch." He looked up from the motor. "You know, you caused something of a sensation."

## MAN CRAZY

"I did? What do you mean?" She thought of Jacob Carson's offer.

"I think you know what I mean." He changed the subject. "Say, think you could run the boat while I tune the carburetor?"

"I've never driven a boat."

"Can you drive a car?"

"Yes," she said.

"Then you won't have any trouble. A speedboat's about the same as a car except the road is bigger."

"Right away?" She wished she had worn her bathing suit.

He nodded. "Hop in. I'll run us out of the cove and then you can take over."

He helped her into the boat, cast off the dock lines and idled his craft into the sunlit rippling water.

"You steer it the same as a car. This is your accelerator here, and down there is the gear lever. Push it forward to go forward, in the middle for neutral, and pull it back for reverse. Got it?"

"Got it."

"All right. Take over."

He stepped to the raised engine box. Before getting to work he pulled his T-shirt over his head and tossed it onto the front seat beside her. She looked at the bronzed expanse of his shoulders. She wanted to touch him.

"Speed up till that needle points to twenty-five," he ordered, indicating the tachometer.

She pulled the throttle down and the boat shot ahead. The needle crept past twenty-five and she drew the throttle back. She looked ahead at the broad blue lake, and behind at the fan of spray. This was exhilarating—and she was alone with Peter West now, for the first time really alone.

## MAN CRAZY

As he worked on the carburetor, a needle on the dash went up. He glanced at it, nodded his satisfaction, and turned back to the engine.

Unaccountably, Annie Lou felt jealous of the engine. She saw the shoreline of a small hilltop island coming at them, and considered the possibility of running the boat on shore. There was no other boat in sight. They would be marooned.

At the last instant she turned the wheel and swept past the island, still fondly imagining the two of them alone there.

West tapped her shoulder. "I think that's done it," he said above the roar of the engine. "Want to head back, or would you like to ride around a while?"

"Whatever you want to do. I'm not busy today."

"Say! Have you ever water skied?"

Annie Lou shook her head. She had recently noticed skiers on the lake, though, and had wondered what skiing felt like.

"Want to try it?" West asked.

"I'll have to go home and put on my bathing suit."

He took the wheel and she moved to his left. "I've got some suits at the house I keep for guests. There should be one to fit you." He swung the boat in a tight circle and made for his home cove.

At the boathouse he cut the engine. "Look in the back bedroom," he said. "I'll wash the grease off my hands while you're dressing."

Without difficulty Annie Lou found the suits in the bedroom closet. She settled unhesitatingly on a scarlet bikini, and fastened the small sections into place. The full-length mirror set into the closet door brought an unabashed smile of delight to her face. The halter performed a minimum job of containing her breasts, and the lower part left little to the

## MAN CRAZY

imagination. She combed her hair lightly, letting the long blonde strands cascade about her naked shoulders. She hurried back to the boathouse.

West's eyebrows rose. "Very nice!" he said.

Annie Lou smiled. "Thank you."

Again he took the boat out of the cove to instruct Annie Lou in the fundamentals of water skiing. For half an hour she tried to ride the slippery boards, with only meager success.

As West brought the boat around again after she had fallen for the dozenth time, she said, "You'd better give up on me. I can't do this."

"Let's try again. Learning is always hard."

"Well, if you aren't tired, I'm not." She took the rope again and signaled. The boat pulled ahead and water rushed at her widely, its pressure urgent against her. Suddenly she was free and gliding effortlessly over the surface

West raised his hand in salute, smiling, and Annie Lou smiled back. The boat moved swiftly across the lake, and gradually she began to feel more confidence about staying upright.

There was the island again, the same one she had considered running into earlier. She swung left on the skis, still feeling the newness of her accomplishment. She went over the wake of the boat, drawing herself closer to the shore of the island, and twisting her body slightly. The gesture upset her already precarious balance. One ski went from under her. She spun, struck the surface on her side. Water forced itself painfully up her nose. She bobbed to the surface and pushed her hair from her face. Her feet touched bottom—she found unexpectedly that the water was barely waist deep.

The speedboat had swung around and was coming



## MAN CRAZY

toward her. In sudden inspiration, Annie Lou unfastened the halter of the bikini and let it sink. She crouched in the water till the surface just reached above her breasts.

The boat lost speed and drew alongside her.

"That was great!" West said. "If you hadn't tried to take the wake so soon I don't think you'd have spilled. It takes a while to get the feel of it. Here, I'll help you into the boat." He put out his portable boarding ladder and leaned to give her a hand.

"I—I'm afraid I lost something," she demurred.

"Lost something?" He looked about. "We'll pick up the ski after we get you aboard."

She shook her head and smiled apologetically. "Not the skis. Part of my bathing suit. I mean your bathing suit." She brought one hand down modestly as if to cover herself. "The top of it came off when I hit the water."

West laughed. "Oh, so that's it. Well, you can wear my shirt back to the house." He picked up his shirt from the front seat and offered it to her.

*Damn it*, she said to herself. Then, "Maybe I'd better dry off some before I put on your shirt. You know how wet cloth is. You can see right through it. Close your eyes and I'll climb up."

"Okay." He dropped the shirt and looked the other way.

Annie Lou started up the ladder, then paused and said, "I'm afraid you're going to have to help me up. I'm a little tired from skiing."

West turned back, held down a hand, and dutifully closed his eyes. *It would be just like him not to peek*, Annie Lou thought. She took the preferred hand and stepped on the bottom rung of the short ladder with both feet. She leaned backward,

## MAN CRAZY

holding his hand as tightly as she could. The maneuver had the effect she desired. West lost balance. Annie Lou screamed and they both fell into the lake. Spluttering and laughing they stood up again, and Annie Lou impulsively thrust herself against him, holding both his arms for support in the waist-deep water. Her bare breasts strained against him. She felt him draw tight. His smile disappeared. He looked down at her as if seeing her for the first time, with a stare of such gravity that for a moment Annie Lou thought she had miscalculated, and was making him dislike her. His gaze did not waver, and she could not take her eyes from his face. The boat drifted past them to the shore and grated against the rocky bottom. Very slowly, as if he were trying desperately to check himself, his face moved toward hers. Their lips touched. His kiss became urgent, probing. Annie Lou responded eagerly, her arms holding him yearningly. His hand covered her breast. Her breath caught and the tip of her breast grew turgid beneath his touch. The world around her seemed to lessen and fade.

He lifted her in his arms, carried her past the grounded boat and onto the shore of the island. No word was spoken. She smelled his wet, clean flesh and the tang of pine in the still air.

He lowered her gently on the pine needle blanket that covered the island and knelt beside her.

"I want you, Annie Lou," he said in a low voice. "You know that, don't you?"

"Yes." She held her arms out. "Please." He came into her embrace. Dim unwanted memories came to her mind. The lonely, half animal passion that night of her father's funeral, with her uncle as partner—the teacher in high school—and then under the softly

## MAN CRAZY

caressing hands of Peter West the bad memories vanished. She felt her life was starting only now, in this moment and for this moment, that time had not existed before and would not exist after.

“Peter. Peter . . .”

Her whole being became a receptacle of exquisite sensation. Nothing like this had ever happened before. She rose to meet his love on a soaring curve of emotion. Her ecstasy waxed to a point nearly unbearable.

Later, she lay with closed eyes listening to Peter West’s slow, regular breathing. She said after a while, “I think I bit you.” She raised herself on an elbow, studied his shoulder and giggled. “I did bite you, sure enough.”

He smiled lazily and she marveled at the whiteness of his teeth. She ran one hand through the stubble of his crew-cut hair, then lowered her face and kissed him. His hands moved magically over her naked body. As he again came eagerly to her, she prayed fervently that this day would go on and on, and never end.

## Seven

FOR Annie Lou Goode, the sun had risen. On the morning after her day with Peter West, she woke at dawn. She stretched languorously, reliving every moment, still feeling the fulfillment of every fiber of her being. She gazed at the brightening day, wondering if he were awake, and wishing she were with him.

She tried not to recall his preoccupation when they came back from the island. He had appeared almost worried. He had said nothing about seeing her again. She stood up, walked to the window. Maybe she should have played hard to get. Maybe . . .

She turned. Susie was sitting up, wide awake in the other bed, and looking at her strangely. "What are you doing up so early, Annie Lou? You sick or something?"

"Mind your own business, Susie," Annie Lou said absently.

Susie smiled. "I found it."

"What are you talking about?"

"That little camera. Where'd you get it? What did you have to do for it?"

"Why, you nosy little—"

"I didn't hurt it—and I didn't tell Ma about it, so you'd better watch what you call me." Susie got out

## MAN CRAZY

of bed. "Where did you get it, Annie Lou? I saw one in a magazine, and they cost a lot of money. Tell me how you got it, or I'll tell Ma about it."

Annie Lou forced back the temptation to slap her sister. "All right. Mr. Carson gave it to me."

"Mr. Carson? That old man? You mean he just—just gave it to you?"

"Damn it! Yes! He just gave it to me! Now will you shut up?" She moved away and jerked her nightgown over her head.

Susie put her hands to her breasts. "I'm nearly as big as you up here, Annie Lou."

Annie Lou scoffed. "You're nothing but a baby."

"I'm fifteen. Are you sure you didn't let old man Carson do anything? He wouldn't just give you something like that camera. I'll bet you let him do something."

Annie Lou finished dressing in shorts and halter. It was going to be another hot day. "Think anything you want to. I don't care." She left the bedroom.

As soon after breakfast as she could get away from helping with dishes, Annie Lou left the house.

Peter's car was gone and his house was locked. She returned home, and all morning kept a close watch on the road to the lake. Several cars went by—the Carsons, Ashley Murray, John Townsend, even Sam Lewis in his rattle-trap truck. But not Peter West in his black Thunderbird, until early afternoon. Fifteen minutes later Annie Lou rang his doorbell.

West had a glass in his hand when he answered the ring. He seemed glad to see her, but reserved.

"Are you going to invite me in?" she asked.

"Sure." He pulled the door wide, ushered her into the living room. The glass front panels were open. A warm lake breeze tugged lazily at the drapes.

## MAN CRAZY

Annie Lou walked out to the terrace. She said softly, "I love this beautiful view." When he made no comment, she asked anxiously, "Is something the matter, Peter?"

He took a swallow of his drink and sat down. "Yes," he said.

She joined him on the sofa. "Shouldn't I have come? Didn't you want to see me?"

"Yes! I wanted to see you. I wanted you last night, and this morning. I haven't thought of anything or anyone but you since yesterday."

"That's the way I've felt. There's nothing wrong with feeling that way, is there?"

"I'm still married," West said.

"But you told me you were separated from your wife," she protested, bewildered, a little frightened. Love was a game at which she had never lost—why, with this man, did she seem to be winning and losing at the same time?

He lifted his glass moodily. "Separated, yes. But Donna hasn't contacted me about a divorce."

"Do you love her?"

"That's not the question. I'm a married man. I'm also quite a bit older than you."

"What difference does that make?" Uncle Amos had been older. The teacher—he'd been older. For a girl with a not-much father behind her, maybe the man always had to be older.

Peter West smiled at her tenderly. "You could do better than get involved with me. You're a very wonderful girl. I think enough of you not to want you hurt."

"What happened out there on the island—didn't mean anything to you?"

"It meant everything, Annie Lou. But it should not

## MAN CRAZY

have happened. I couldn't help myself. When I fell in the lake and had you in my arms, there was nothing I could do—but love you.”

“You didn't fall in the lake, Peter. I pulled you in. I wanted us to—to love. I took the top of the bathing suit off myself. It didn't come off when I fell off the skis. I—what's a nice word for what I did to you?”

“Seduced?”

Annie Lou nodded. “I seduced you, Peter.”

When he grinned in delighted amusement, she thought she had won her point. She edged toward him and put her hand on his arm.

He tensed. “I'm serious. I think the best thing you could do is forget all about yesterday.”

She drew her hand back, in the manner of a child reprimanded. “Don't you like me?”

“Of course I like you. If I didn't like you I wouldn't give a damn what happened to you.”

She got up and moved across the room and looked out at the lake. “We don't have to—I mean, can't we just be friends?”

“Annie Lou, believe me, I could never think of you as a pal! One look at you and any notion of being your buddy goes out the window!”

She put her hands on her hips and walked back to face him. “Why is that, Peter? What do you think of when you look at me?”

His face went serious. “I think of all the mistakes I ever made, and I have a strong and very unrealistic desire to throw everything to the winds and start over again.”

“And you can't do that?”

“No.”

She said from the heart, “I don't think I understand you, Peter. Why can't you do what you want

## MAN CRAZY

to do? You have everything in the world—money, education, friends—”

He finished his drink. “I suppose nobody has everything, Annie Lou. I’m leaving this afternoon. I won’t be back for a week or two. You think this whole thing over and perhaps you’ll see that I’m right.”

She asked weakly, “Why do you have to go away? Please don’t go away.” And then she was in his arms, and being comforted. This was her weapon. She instinctively knew when to use it. She felt his body tighten against hers. She could do that to a man. She knew her power.

“Take me with you, Peter?”

He pushed her an arm’s length away, shook his head with a knowing smile. “Oh, no, you don’t, pal. Keep your distance!”

She eluded his grasp and threw herself against him again, laughing, her manner frivolous, her intent serious. “Are you afraid to kiss me?” She threw back her head and looked into his eyes.

He lifted his hands gently to either side of her face. He lowered his head and their lips touched, almost without passion.

The musical doorbell chimed.

“Oh, no!” Annie Lou moaned. “Don’t answer it!”

“I have to.”

He went down the hallway. Peevishly, Annie Lou turned her back to the room and glared at the lake. She heard the door open, and then a loud voice she recognized as John Townsend’s. Townsend had come with his wife, Sarah. Townsend’s already smiling face brightened even more at the sight of Annie Lou.

“Well!” he said. “Hello there!”

Sarah Townsend put her hand on Peter West’s



## MAN CRAZY

arm. "How clumsy of us! We've interrupted something!"

West ignored the remark and went to the bar. "What can I fix for you, Sarah? John?"

"Nothing, Pete. We just stopped by to invite you—"

"Speak for yourself, John Townsend." Sarah slipped onto a barstool. "I'd like a scotch, Peter. A double, while you're at it."

Townsend gave his wife a disgusted look, then threw himself into a chair. "As I was saying," he went on, "our house is almost finished and we're planning a little celebration. Two weeks from this coming Friday. Can you be there, Pete?" He turned quickly and smiled. "And you too, Annie Lou—We couldn't have a party without you!"

West poured the drink for Sarah. "I may be out of town."

"That's too bad. You'll come, won't you, Annie Lou?"

"If you'd like for me to," she said.

"He'd like for you to," said Sarah.

"You're being damned rude!" Townsend said to his wife. "For once can't you keep your mouth shut?"

"With you as busy as a bee mentally raping this child, someone's got to say something!"

Townsend swore in a kind of agony.

Sarah laughed. "But I know something about you. Your eyes are bigger than your—well." She pointed a finger at him, then bent the knuckles and let the tip of the finger drop. She laughed again and picked up her glass.

"Give her another drink, Pete, will you?" Townsend almost shouted. "Make it a triple. Maybe she'll pass out."

Annie Lou walked to the bar. She looked at Peter

## MAN CRAZY

West. "I've got to go home. I'll—I'll see you before you leave?"

"I'll try to stop by."

She nodded to his guests and left the room. As she went out the back door she heard Sarah Townsend say in a loud voice, "Tell us all, Peter. What have you and that little child of nature been up to? Whatever it is, I'm sure I can't blame you. If I were a man—"

She let the door slam behind her and hurried up the road. She did not like these people who had come to live on the lake. Except for Peter, she did not like any of them.

An hour later the black Thunderbird came up the new roadway. It slowed before the Goode house, but did not stop. It gained speed again quickly and was soon gone.

Several days later, as the two girls dressed in the early light, Susie asked, "You didn't hear him come back last night, did you?"

Annie Lou paused at combing her hair. "Who do you mean?"

Susie affected a blithe unconcern. "Who? Why, your boy friend, of course. Old man Peter West."

"How do you know? You're lying, Susie. And stop calling him my boy friend."

"Okay. But he still came back last night. It was full moon. I was awake and I heard a car, so I got up and looked. It was his black Thunderbird." She raised her eyebrows suggestively. "I don't think he was by himself, either. It looked to me like there was somebody in the car with him, a girl."

Annie Lou pulled the comb painfully through her hair. "I think you're making this up. Besides, what

## MAN CRAZY

difference would it make to me whether he came back or not, or who came back with him.”

“Sure! You started looking like a sick calf the day he left and you haven’t stopped since—”

Annie Lou hurled the comb. Susie ran laughing from the room.

Annie Lou thoughtfully retrieved the comb. Ten days had passed. He had said he would be gone a week or two. There was really no reason for Susie to make it up. She was not that interested in baiting Annie Lou, nor was she that imaginative.

After breakfast, she took Susie aside. “Were you kidding me about last night? I’ll get even if you were.” She twisted Susie’s earlobe.

The younger girl gave a yelp of pain and pulled away. “No—I was telling the truth! Why don’t you go to his house and see for yourself?”

Annie Lou frowned and went to the screen door.

Susie warned her, “I’m not going to do your work, Annie Lou!”

“You just tell Ma I’ll be back in a little while.” She stepped out and turned toward the lake.

She saw the Cadillac and another car parked behind Carson’s house as she passed. The Carson place was going to be even finer than Pete West’s.

She rounded the curve in the road. The black Thunderbird had returned. Annie Lou took a deep breath, and hesitated a moment longer. With a determined step she went to the door, again paused. She touched her hand to her hair, and firmly pushed the doorbell.

She waited. No sound came from inside. She rang again, this time with more insistence. A light went on in the kitchen, and only then did she realize how early the hour was.

## MAN CRAZY

The door swung open. Annie Lou faced a woman, tall, statuesque, brunette, with short, tousled hair and a very sleepy face. She wore a sheer shorty nightgown, and, with the kitchen light behind her, it was apparent that she had a very good figure.

"Is this some sort of local custom, waking people at six-thirty in the morning?" the woman asked.

Annie Lou gasped at her. "Who—who are you?"

The woman rubbed her eyes with the back of one hand. "Who am I? What in the hell is this? I am Donna West, and I fervently hope this does not happen every morning." She pushed her hand through her hair. "And just who are you?"

Annie Lou continued to stare, stunned. "I'm—I'm Annie Lou. Annie Lou Goode."

"I'm very pleased to know you," Mrs. West said with unveiled sarcasm. "Now is there something that can't wait until a civilized hour?"

"I—I—"

Suddenly, the woman pointed a finger at Annie Lou. "Goode! Of course. You must be one of the girls that comes to do the cleaning! Peter told me about you people. You're terribly ambitious, dear, but really, the cleaning can wait. Now if you'll just come back later, say, about noon."

With a vague smile she started to close the door.

"Wait!" Annie Lou said.

"Yes?"

"I — I want to talk to Peter —"

"Peter?" Donna West's eyes narrowed. "Perhaps you're not just the cleaning woman." She looked Annie Lou up and down with frank appraisal, then shook her head. "Not dear old Peter! Don't tell me Peter West has been playing house with the farmer's

## MAN CRAZY

daughter?" She laughed. Her laugh was like icicles shredding. "Wait a minute. I'll go wake him up. This little reunion should be interesting."

Annie Lou did not wait for more. She turned and ran, stumbling and almost falling. Thinly, the laughter followed. She ran up the road blindly, hardly able to see through her hot and helpless tears. Beyond the bend she heard an automobile. She ran into the woods.

Finally, exhausted, she slumped at the foot of a pine tree, leaning against the bole. What had happened? He had made no mention of coming back with his wife. After the day on the island how could he have taken another woman in preference to her?

She sat for a long time, watching the sun climb into the treetops. In the distance she heard hammers and a power saw as workmen began their day on the nearby houses. Maybe Ma was right. These people were not her kind. But when she thought of Peter West and compared him to boys she had grown up with, she knew they were not her kind either. They were callow and dull.

She rose at last and pushed back her hair. There was something she could do, to get the things she wanted and to hell with Peter West.

Annie Lou started toward the lake road and the house of Jacob Carson.

## Eight

HER run-in with Edna Carson had served at least one purpose—forewarned, Annie Lou was cautious. She waited until the woman came out and drove away before she went to the door.

Carson, when he answered her ring, seemed pleased though not particularly surprised.

“I’ve thought over what we were talking about a couple of weeks ago, Mr. Carson,” Annie Lou began. She felt ill at ease.

He took her hands. “You’ve decided to accept my offer, is that it? A very wise decision.” He took a long leather billfold from his pocket. “Can you come to the city tomorrow? You’ll have to see what I had in mind.” He handed her several crisp new bills. “This will cover your bus fare and any little, er, odds and ends you might like to buy.” He pulled a white card from the wallet. “Call me at this number as soon as you arrive at the bus depot. I’ll come at once to pick you up.”

Annie Lou stared at the old man, amazed at the organized manner in which he had everything worked out. She took money and card without looking closely at either. “I’ll—I’ll be living in Capital City?”

“In the apartment I told you about. Be sure to ex-

## MAN CRAZY

plain to your mother the kind of work you'll be doing. When the apartment is being used for business, it would be awkward for her to visit you. Otherwise, make plain to her she's welcome." He released her hands and touched his fingers to either side of her neck. The fingers were cold and clammy, and instinctively Annie Lou wanted to pull back. But she did not. "Exquisite! Absolutely exquisite!" Carson murmured. "Until tomorrow, then? *Auf Wiedersehen.*"

He stepped back and closed the door. Annie Lou looked at the money—five ten-dollar bills. Fifty dollars. More money than she had ever had before in her whole life, and hers to spend as she liked.

She folded the bills and the card and poked them inside her halter. And then she turned and walked up the road toward home.

The big intercity bus made its final turn into the ramp of the depot. The door sighed open. "Capital City!" the driver called.

Annie Lou slid out of her seat and started up the aisle. She had had no choice about her seatmate. The man took her arm in a gesture of parting. "Now don't you forget. If you need any help at all, you just pick up the telephone and call me at that number I gave you. You understand? Any time at all!"

Annie Lou pulled free. The driver broadly smiled at her as she stepped down to the platform.

"Could you tell me where I'd find a telephone?" she asked him.

He gave directions and she nodded her thanks. There were half a dozen telephone booths in the terminal, all occupied. She looked at the crowded waiting room. Many male eyes were on her, and more

## MAN CRAZY

were being added as she stood there. As usual, instead of feeling self-conscious at the attention, she had a sense of pride at being singled out.

A booth became free. Annie Lou found a dime in her purse and dialed Carson's number.

"Jacob Carson and Company," a female voice answered.

"Mr.—Mr. Carson," Annie Lou said.

"Mr. Carson is in conference. Would you speak with anyone else?"

"I—Mr. Carson is expecting me to call him. Tell him it's—Miss Goode."

"I'm sorry, but—"

"You tell Mr. Carson I'm calling!" Annie Lou said with sudden heat. "He's expecting me to call him and you'll be doing yourself a favor to let him know!"

There was a pause, then, "Will you please hold on?"

After several seconds and an almost inaudible click, she recognized Carson's voice. "Annie Lou? Is that you?"

"I'm at the bus station."

"I can't get away for another ten or fifteen minutes. Take a cab and go to the address I'm going to give you. Got a pencil?"

She found one in her purse. "All right."

"Take a cab to 4107 Broadland, an apartment house. Tell the superintendent who you are. He'll let you in the apartment and I'll be there as soon as I can. Have you money enough for the cab fare?"

"Yes."

"I've got to hang up now, dear." The connection was cut. She hung up, and suddenly felt tears in her eyes. She was alone and frightened. Innately, she sensed she was doing wrong. "Peter," she whispered.



## MAN CRAZY

The door rattled and she looked around to see a stout woman standing outside the booth glaring at her. Annie Lou opened the door and stepped outside. "I'm sorry, I didn't know you were waiting."

The woman barged past her into the booth, slamming the door.

Annie Lou picked up her bag and went to the information counter. "I want a taxi," she said.

"Out front," the man said curtly. He looked up, saw Annie Lou, and a light went on in his face. "A cab? Let me run out and get you one." He started from behind the counter, but Annie Lou stopped him.

"That's all right. I can find it. Thank you."

She went outside and took the first cab in line. She gave the driver the address and settled back in the seat.

The apartment building was large and quietly expensive. When Annie Lou identified herself to him, the superintendent showed her to a fifth floor apartment, his manner friendly yet respectful.

The apartment was huge. She grasped what Carson had meant when he spoke of a club. A vast living room, a TV room, a library, a dining room big enough for thirty people and the kitchen to supply it—she hoped he remembered his promise that she would do no cleaning.

By a kind of instinct, she found what would be her own bedroom, well removed from the guest section of the place.

She was not prepared for what she saw here. The room was not small but the bed seemed to make it so. The most tremendous bed Annie Lou had ever seen, at least eight feet long, and of equal width, it was covered with a satin spread of ornate design.

## MAN CRAZY

More than the bed, the walls caught her attention. From just above the baseboard to a height of about four feet the walls were of plate glass mirror. Another large mirror covered the ceiling over the bed.

She leaned back on the bed. Its softness seemed to embrace her. She rolled over, thinking of the hard narrow thing she slept on at home.

Home. She sat up, and at once saw her image all around her in the mirrors. This was home now. She got to her knees and made a face at herself.

"Annie Lou? Are you here, Annie Lou?"

She jumped up and straightened the spread. "Is that you, Mr. Carson?" She went down the hallway and met him at the entrance to the living room.

He was beaming. "Yes, my dear, it is I. And I want that to be the last time I ever hear you call me Mr. Carson. To you, I am Jake."

He took her arms. The way he touched her, the way he looked at her, made her flesh crawl. Strangely, as if sensing her revulsion, he released his grip.

"Magnificent," he said. "You are breathtakingly magnificent, my darling!" He led her toward the TV room, which also contained the bar. "We must drink a toast!" He held out a glass to Annie Lou. She hesitated, and he urged, "We have to toast our new enterprise—and us!"

She took the glass and started to drink.

"Not here," Carson said. He took her arm and guided her down the hallway. "Now," he said in the bedroom, clinking glasses with her, "to us, Annie Lou."

She lifted the glass and drank. The liquid was strong. Her eyes watered.

Carson placed both glasses on the table beside

## MAN CRAZY

the bed. He turned a knob on a panel below the tabletop. Music filled the room.

Eyes glistening, he began to unfasten the buttons of her dress.

"I—I just got here," she said. "I'd like to—to clean up."

He stopped what he was doing. "Of course. Thoughtless of me." He brought a sheer nylon garment from the closet. "Put this on, Annie Lou. I'll wait."

She went into the bathroom, locked the door and sat on the edge of the tub. For several seconds she thought she was going to be sick. The brandy had made her dizzy, and her stomach felt wrong. The leathery old man in the next room did not help her sense of nausea.

She looked at her reflection in the mirror. *You got yourself into this, Annie Lou*, she thought. *This is what you wanted, and now you have it.*

She slowly removed her clothes, and put on the negligee. After a while she unlocked the door.

Carson was in bed, beneath a silken sheet. Annie Lou went toward him—there was nowhere else to go. She shrugged back the negligee, letting it fall at her feet. Carson made a sound like a cat whose tail has been slammed in a door. He pounced from under the sheet and pulled her onto the bed. He was whispering unintelligible words. His body was thin and dry as parchment. He resembled the mummies whose pictures she had seen in school books.

There the resemblance ended. Carson was very much alive. His hands were all over her, nervously jerking about, stopping here and there, as if he feared missing anything.

His love play lasted for minutes, and then he found

## MAN CRAZY

her. She had dreaded his passion—but instead of revulsion, all she felt was amusement. By comparison with other men she had known, Jacob Carson came out very poorly. What he did not know was apparently not hurting him. His breath was hot and quick against Annie Lou's throat, and as his excitement mounted, a deep wheeze came to his breathing. In the mirror above the bed, his movements were frantic, grotesque.

At last he was done, and lay in her arms completely spent and exhausted. Minutes went by. His wheeze subsided into slower and more regular breathing. He was asleep. Gently, she manuevered away from him and left him on the bed.

Neglige over her shoulders, she tiptoed down the hall into the TV room, where she poured herself another drink of brandy. She went to the window and looked out at the quiet street five floors below. She raised the glass. "Here's to you, Annie Lou!" she said. She drank the brandy.

Jake Carson's demands upon her proved to be surprisingly mild, though not because he wished it that way. It was simply a matter of time for him, of building his tired machinery back to the performance level after each time with her.

Also, although she had been cynical about it, he had a very real job for her to do. Within a week, a two-man domestic staff was added to the apartment, as well as a girl secretary who arranged the business lunches and dinners, prepared agenda, took notes, and was extremely civil and helpful to Annie Lou. For the first time in years, Annie Lou found another female treating her with respect and easy good man-

## MAN CRAZY

ners—perhaps Miss Atkins was paid to be extra pleasant, but Annie Lou liked it, just the same.

Every week, Annie Lou received a big paycheck from Carson's company—and as time passed, she began to feel she was earning it. She seemed to be learning a good deal about finance, just from talking to Carson's impressive guests—who treated her invariably as a respected hostess.

She had beautiful clothes, good music to listen to, leisure to read books. When she expressed a desire to go home for a few days, Carson gave her a nearly new Ford which belonged to the company, but which she could use as she liked.

Her first visit home was made after two months in the city.

She was quietly and expensively dressed, in clothes that befitted her station as a successful young career woman. She herself wondered how much she had changed—and how many other successful young business women had arrived via the same route Annie Lou had used—on their backs.

Esther was thrilled to see her. "Annie Lou!" She hugged her daughter and then stood back to look at her proudly. "You're looking fine, child! City living ain't hurting you none! None at all!"

"Do you work hard, Annie Lou?" Susie wanted to know.

"Sometimes more, sometimes less. How are things around home? Anything new with the folks at the lake?" She tried to make the question sound nonchalant, but she saw the smirk on Susie's face.

"Old man West has his wife up here. He brought her just before you left."

"His wife?"

"Uh-huh. I heard some of the talk. She was going

## MAN CRAZY

to divorce him. Then she found out he was doing pretty good with his property, and she came back for keeps." Susie laughed. "Mr. Townsend says Peter West is a damned fool! He says the trouble with West is he's got principles!"

"There's nothing wrong with principles," Esther put in.

Susie only smiled.

Later, alone with Annie Lou, Susie confided, "You ought to see the way they carry on—you just wouldn't believe it! I've been kind of watching them since you left, and I never saw anything like it!"

"Like what?" Annie Lou asked.

"Well, there's that Mrs. Townsend, the one that drinks all the time. Their house was finished this week and she's been staying up here. But he's been in Capital City most of the time. She's got a boy friend, Annie Lou! A fella comes in a little boat every afternoon late and the two of 'em go in the house and he don't come out till the next morning!"

Annie Lou smiled patronizingly. "What do you know about things like that? You're just a—a child, Susie."

"And she ain't the only one," Susie went on, undeterred. "Old Peter West's wife is having herself a time, too."

Annie Lou stared at her sister.

"Thought that would get a rise out of you!" The younger girl giggled. "And you won't ever guess who she's taken up with. Never in a million years."

"You mean Donna West?"

Susie's eyebrows rose. "How'd you know what her name was?"

"Never mind that. If you're going to finish your gossip, go ahead."

## MAN CRAZY

"Sam Lewis, that's who!"

"Sam Lewis? The Sam Lewis *we* know?"

Susie nodded. "That's the one."

"How do you know? You're just making this up."

"That isn't all," Susie went on. "Mr. Murray—I better not tell you about it."

Annie Lou's curiosity was fired. "Go on, Susie, what about Mr. Murray?"

"Well, I was down near his house a few days ago and he called me over and gave me a coke. He was there by himself. He said he wanted to show me his house and I went inside with him." Susie smiled mischievously. "He tried to do things to me, Annie Lou. He put his hands on me up here"—she touched her hands to her breasts—"and then he wanted me to take my clothes off. He got real excited."

"Did you—what did you do?"

Susie shook her head. "Nothing. I threw the coke at him and ran out. But it was funny."

Annie Lou stayed the night with her family, though she was disappointed at not finding Peter at the lake. According to Susie, Donna West was there, but Annie Lou had no desire to see her under any circumstances.

The following day, after lunch, Annie Lou returned to the city. She was one of them now, she thought tiredly, one of the well-dressed, successful, basically rotten crowd that worked in the city and played adult games in the country. To think she once had looked up to the rest of the crew!

She drove the Ford down the old back road that led to the Capital City highway. What lay ahead?

## MAN CRAZY

Would she be ready to launch out on her own? She could not go on indefinitely as Carson's mistress.

About two miles from the highway, she felt she was being followed. The car behind her was old, battered and dirty, and it kept all too close. When Annie Lou slowed, the car behind slowed also. When she speeded up, the other car hung behind her almost as if it were being towed. Her rear view mirror showed there was only the driver in the other car. Her own car's dust obscured her view of his features.

She wished she had taken the more-traveled road into Hoppersville. The short cut had almost no traffic now—though before the lake was filled, it had been busy enough, part of a thoroughfare which later had been submerged.

To either side there were only wooded hills—no houses, no fields, no people.

The trailing car drew up alongside at last. The driver peered at her from under the crumpled hat that was drawn low on his forehead. He passed, cut in front and stopped abruptly. Annie Lou jammed on the brake and the Ford began to slide. Her right rear wheel caught on the edge of the road. She was thrown across the seat. The car tipped crazily, then settled back on its wheels with a skull-jarring impact. The engine stalled, a cloud of red dust arose, and then there was silence.

Annie Lou tried to collect herself, half-stunned by what had happened. She heard a car door slam. The other driver was walking toward her. In a burst of anger she yelled at him, "What were you trying to do, mister? Kill me?"

The man was middle-aged, and his chin was stubbled with white beard. From his gait she judged he



## MAN CRAZY

was drunk—or else the near-accident had shaken him up.

He came to the window of her car and clamped his hands over the edge. He leaned forward and stared. She smelled the whiskey. “Yeah,” he said, “it’s you, all right. A little older, but that’s all to the good.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t you remember me, baby?” He looked at her car and her excellent clothes. “Looks like you’ve come up in the world. I reckon if I had what you got I’d come up too.”

She turned the key, starting her stalled engine, and shoved the gear stick into reverse. Before the wheels stirred, he turned off the ignition and took away the keys. He waved them once in her face, smiled, and dropped them in his shirt pocket. He asked. “What’s your hurry, honey?”

“Give me back those keys.”

“I will. In good time.”

“I want those keys, and I want them now!”

“Spirit! I like spirit in a woman. If I don’t give you the keys what are you gonna do?”

She stared at him. Where had she seen that face?

“You ran me off the road on purpose, didn’t you?” she asked.

“You might say that.” He grinned. “’Course, I been drinking a little this afternoon and it mighta been an accident. Tell you what, you pay me what you owe me, and you can have your keys back and be on your way.”

“What do I owe you? Who the hell are you? I’ve never seen you before in my life!”

“Real sure you ain’t seen me before? Think back a couple of years or so.”

## MAN CRAZY

Had he been one of Pa's friends? More than his face was familiar. He smelled of corn whiskey, and that was the smell of the past.

"You're going to get in trouble for this," she said. "You can't—you can't—" Her words stopped. She remembered. She knew when she had seen that face before.

The man nodded. "Got it?"

"The—the survey crew—"

"You remember what you owe me?"

"I—I owe you some money. I got scared and I ran off—"

He jerked the car door open. "I aim to get what I paid for."

"I've got some money with me!" Annie Lou reached quickly for her purse.

The man grabbed her roughly. "No you don't! It ain't the money I want. Come on, get outta there."

"What do you think you're doing?" she yelled. She tried to twist out of his grip. "Let go of me!"

He pulled her out of the car. She grabbed the doorsill to keep from hitting the ground.

"Now we'll take up where we left off," he said.

"Somebody will come along and catch you! Turn me loose before you get yourself in trouble!"

He grabbed at her blouse with his free hand.

"Wait," she said, her voice suddenly calm. "Don't do that. You don't have to tear it. I'll take it off." She looked around in the twilight. "Do we have to—to do it right out here? Suppose a car came by?"

His eyebrows rose in surprise, then lowered suspiciously. "I remember what you did last time. You ran off. You ain't going to run off again."

She shook her head, tried to smile. "I won't run off."

"You bet you won't. I'm hanging onto you."

## MAN CRAZY

“Why don’t we—why don’t we go over there behind those trees?”

“All right.” He was still suspicious. “But don’t try nothing, because if you do you’ll get something you didn’t bargain for.”

With his hold tight on her arm, they went up a slope from the road and entered a thicket of stunted pine. Annie Lou looked back. Their two cars were no longer visible. “Is this all right?”

He was genuinely puzzled. “You mean you ain’t going to fight?”

Annie Lou shrugged. With her free hand she opened her blouse. “These clothes cost me a lot of money. I don’t see any reason to tear them all up.” She looked at him frankly. “Do you?”

Dumfounded, he shook his head.

Later, as Annie Lou dressed herself she decided he had not been too bad after all. The surveyor was considerably more man than Jake, in fact, he was a not unwelcome change.

“Does that even accounts?” He leaned back against a tree, his eyes half closed.

He nodded. “You’re a lot of woman. A hell of a lot of woman.” He nodded again. “Me and you’re even.”

“Good!” She retrieved her keys from his pocket.

“Anything I can do for you before I travel on?”

“No. I’ll be okay after I rest. I got just a little more than I expected.” He closed his eyes and sighed.

Annie Lou tossed and caught the keys. “Well, goodbye,” she said.

As she pulled down the road, she glanced in her rear-view mirror at the battered old car still sitting at the roadside. It looked just like its owner, sitting under the tree. Philosophically, she decided that life was not as hard as some people made it out. There

## MAN CRAZY

was a time to fight, and there was a time not to fight.

There was a time to relax, and enjoy it.

Then she had a terrifying thought—she was really turning bad. What would Peter West think of Annie Lou now? Would he still feel he must not take advantage of her?

## Nine

SHE fought against looking him up. But one night, when Jacob Carson had a social engagement elsewhere, she turned to the W's, found West, and ran her finger down the column. The finger stopped. She read aloud: "Peter H. West, 150 Huntington Road, Cherry 8-8603."

She occupied herself with television for half an hour. Before the program was done, she turned restless. The telephone number ran through her mind. She went to the telephone and dialed the number, hanging up after one ring.

Minutes passed. Again she reached for the telephone. She heard Peter's voice say, "Hello?"

She opened her mouth but no words came. He persisted, "Who is it? Who's there?"

With the phone still to her ear, Annie Lou pressed the cradle down, cutting their connection. She closed her eyes and sat for several minutes more.

Then, on sudden inspiration, she dialed the operator. "Long distance," she requested. "Information in Hoppersville. I'd like the phone number of Peter H. West, on Lake Thomas. Thank you."

After a short interval the operator gave her the number. Annie Lou heard the distant ringing of the

## MAN CRAZY

instrument. She could visualize it on the bar in the living room of Pete's house.

"Hello!"

It was Donna West. Annie Lou recognized the sultry, confident tone.

"Hello!" Donna again said. "Who is it? Say something! Peter? Is that you checking up on me, Peter?"

Once more Annie Lou lowered her hand and severed the connection. Donna West was at the Lake house—Peter was here in the city. There was no plan in her mind, merely an assimilation of information. However, there remained the obvious fact that if she wanted to see West, there would be no better opportunity than the present one.

Annie Lou drove slowly down the street, reading the names and house numbers on mailboxes, until she came to one-fifty. The house was an unpretentious one in the center of a slightly pretentious neighborhood. She eased to the curb and shut off her headlights.

A porch light was burning and the front window showed the bluish glare from a television set. At the end of the driveway the garage door was closed, and there were no cars parked on the street. West was alone in the house.

When she touched the doorbell button, her heart was pounding, and the palms of her hands felt moist.

The door swung open and Peter West peered out, wearing slacks and a T-shirt, and with a book hanging from his left hand.

"Hello, Peter," she said in a low voice.

He stared and then looked past her, as if expecting someone else to be with her.

"I'm alone," she said. She felt that she ought to add something in explanation. "I was in the neighbor-

## MAN CRAZY

hood and I—I—” She stopped for a deep breath. “No. That’s a lie. I knew your wife wasn’t here and I came to see you.”

“Come in.” He motioned with the book. “I heard you were working in town.”

She stepped into his foyer and he closed the door behind her. “This is very nice, Peter,” she said, looking around.

“Thank you. Won’t you—can I get you anything? A drink?” He seemed almost embarrassed.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have come,” she said, turning to face him. “I don’t know what got into me. I was just—just sitting there and—well, here I am.”

He ushered her into the living room, and turned off the television. “I don’t know why I had that thing going. I was reading.”

She nodded and smiled. She had not realized until now how very much she had missed him. She thought of Jake Carson and felt shabby and soiled. “I’ll take that drink after all,” she said.

“Brandy? Scotch?”

She shrugged. “It doesn’t matter.” While he was out of the room she looked about her. The room was tastefully furnished. She could see the touch of Donna West.

He came back, gave her a glass, and sat beside her on the sofa. “I got a telephone call a while ago. When I answered, no one was there.”

She smiled back guiltily over the rim of her glass. “I know.”

“You’re looking wonderful. What sort of work are you doing?”

“Public relations. I’m working for Jacob Carson. I meet a lot of people.” But none of them are you,

## MAN CRAZY

added her heart. "How have you been? Are you—are you happy, Peter? Are you glad she came back?"

He looked down briefly at the glass in his hand. He seemed to change his mind about his answer. Then he said, "I don't think you should have come here."

"Why?"

Peter smiled faintly. "I do have neighbors, you know."

"I thought you meant you were afraid of me," Annie Lou said teasingly.

"Afraid of you? Why?"

She put her glass on the coffee table. "My memory is longer than yours. I haven't forgotten that day on the lake, on the island."

He seemed to tense suddenly. "I remember. That's past, Annie Lou. That never should have happened."

"But it did, Peter!" She moved closer to him and touched his arm. "It did happen!" She sensed the effort he was making to keep from taking her in his arms. "It was wonderful," she said in a whisper. "I dream about you, Peter. I dream of that day on the island—"

He whirled toward her, his face fierce. "What the hell are you doing to me! I can take just so much—go away, Annie Lou. Don't haunt me."

Suddenly all humility left her. "You upright, noble fool," she taunted bitterly. "What do you think your world is? You think I'm a lovely pure young girl. You think your wife is faithful, and that you have to be faithful too. Well, your wife has a country lover—and I'm Jake Carson's mistress. I didn't have to be that. You were the one I loved. You and your damned principles—you had to drive me to him. You and your clever friends—why did you spoil our world?"



## MAN CRAZY

Why did you come? Why couldn't you leave us alone with our corn liquor and dust? At least we knew who we were."

He moaned with a kind of fury and seized her roughly. "You're lying," he said. "You've never been Jake's woman."

She laughed. He slapped her mouth and then savagely kissed it. She could not speak further. He flung her back on the sofa and pushed at her clothes, still too much himself to damage them. It was Annie Lou herself whom he apparently wanted to damage. Heartbrokenly, angrily, he forced her body to his.

Ecstasy, despair and sheer physical agony made her a plaything, a feather in a gale. They had lost, they both had lost. A day like the one on their island could never happen again.

After a long, violent time he released her. "You slut," he breathed. "You beautiful little slut—and so help me, I love you. Get out, Annie Lou. Don't come back, ever."

Annie Lou straightened, her blouse open and her firm bruised breasts exposed. She pulled the blouse together and straightened her other clothing. She went to the door and without looking back closed it firmly behind her.

On Monday Jacob Carson left the city for a week's business trip to New York, and Annie Lou, desperately homesick, drove to the lake. Esther came to the door. When she saw who her visitor was, she frowned.

"You ain't lost your job, have you, Annie Lou?"

Annie Lou embraced her mother. "No, Ma. It's not that kind of work. I don't get paid by the hour or

## MAN CRAZY

punch a time clock. Where are the boys? Where's Susie?"

Esther led her daughter indoors. The house looked shabbier now than ever. No matter what happened, Annie Lou knew she would never be able to go back all the way.

"The boys are fishing, and Susie has gone down the hill. I suppose she's swimming."

A swim sounded wonderful. Annie Lou had brought a new bathing suit. "Where does she swim from now?"

"The Carson's ain't up here. I think she goes to that little beach between their place and Mr. Murray's."

"I'll look for her." From her purse, Annie Lou took two twenty-dollar bills. "Here, Ma. This might help."

Esther looked at her daughter compassionately, "I want you to have this. Buy yourself something. Buy yourself a hat."

"A hat?" Esther laughed.

"Well, a new dress. Here, take it. Please, Ma?"

Esther looked at her daughter compassionately, then nodded and took the money, stuffing it down her dress between her thin breasts.

Annie Lou went to the bedroom and changed into her bathing suit. She drove to Carson's place, feeling vaguely possessive when she parked at the vacant house. A considerable amount of landscaping had been completed since she had been here last. A flagstone pathway led from the house down the hill to the lake. Towel over her shoulder, Annie Lou swung down the path. The lake was blue and calm, yet more than anything else in her life this vast stretch of peaceful water had brought violent change.

But she did not spend time philosophizing.

## MAN CRAZY

She moved the brick. On the ground lay a ten-towel was draped on a rock a few yards away. She heard someone laugh. The sound came from the underbrush on the slope below Ashley Murray's house. Annie Lou looked for a path. She found a place where the brush had been roughly hacked away. At the top of the rise, in the leveled area before the house, she saw her sister talking to Ashley Murray. She could not hear what was said, but Murray seemed very earnest. He reached toward Susie, who danced out of his grasp.

Annie Lou moved out of sight. Again she heard Susie's musical laugh. She peered out from her place of concealment. Susie was standing close to Murray now, and he was handing her something. She took it, seemed to debate for a moment what to do with it since she wore a bathing suit and had no pocket. Finally she put it on the ground, smiled brightly at Murray, and vanished with him in the direction of his house.

Annie Lou made her way up the hill. She searched the spot where Murray and Susie had been. Something green caught her eye, protruding from under a loose brick.

She moved the brick. On the ground lay a ten dollar bill. Any doubt she had had was gone. In sudden fury, she started into the house. Susie was only a child. Murray would not get away with what he was doing to Annie Lou's baby sister.

Her line of thought broke off. Was Susie really a child? She was fifteen, and physically equal to any woman. The hard upbringing she had had—that they all had had—did not tend to prolong childhood. Early maturity, both mentally and physically, was a fact with their kind of people. Would Annie

## MAN CRAZY

Lou ever forget the night of her father's funeral, when she was not quite fifteen herself?

She picked up the ten-dollar bill. With a wry smile every advantage that offered itself. Ten dollars, for a girl like Susie?

She looked toward the house. The drapes were drawn across the front. She moved to the left of the building and stopped at the first window. Venetian blinds were lowered so she could not see inside. At the rear a small red sports car was parked. There were no blinds over the kitchen windows, but neither was there anything to see.

She completed her circuit, then she went to the edge of the clearing where a patio would be. She seated herself and waited.

A half hour later, the door of the house opened and Susie stepped into the sunlight. She stopped just outside, adjusted her bathing suit and ran her hands through her hair. She walked to the spot where the money had been, moved the brick and frowned. Soon Susie's search became frantic.

"Susie!" Annie Lou called in a loud whisper. "Over here! Behind the bush!"

Susie came haltingly forward. When she saw her sister her mouth dropped. "Annie Lou? What are you doing here?"

"What were you doing in there?" Annie Lou waved a finger in the direction of Murray's house.

"Just looking at the house."

"For half an hour?" From inside the top of her bathing suit Annie Lou retrieved the ten-dollar bill. "Is this what you were looking for?"

Susie stared, then made a lunge for the bill. Annie Lou jumped aside. The two girls halted, regarding

## MAN CRAZY

each other, one with anger, the other with something like amusement.

"You're getting cheated, Susie. He can afford a lot more, and he'd pay more some place else."

"It's none of your damned business!" Susie spat. "Give me that money!"

Annie Lou held out the bill.

Susie grabbed it, glared, and started toward the lake. Annie Lou followed her down the rough path, and caught her by the shoulder.

"You're a fine one to interfere!" Susie said. "I've got my ideas about that big job of yours in the city! You mind your business, and I'll mind mine!"

"I'm not trying to interfere. I'll admit I was surprised. I still thought of you as a little kid."

"Well, I'm not! I'm a grown woman!"

"Sure you are," Annie Lou agreed. "But Murray's got a lot of money. There's no need of your just getting a lousy ten bucks."

Susie's ire cooled. She gave her sister a puzzled look. "Do I just ask him for more?"

"I got thinking while I was waiting for you to come out. I think I know a way we can get a lot of money out of him."

"We?"

"It'll take both of us to do it. Are you interested?"

"Maybe. What is it?"

"You remember that little camera Jake Carson gave me? Well, if we got some pictures of you and Murray—"

"Pictures? Of me and him? You mean while—while—"

"For crying out loud, Susie! I'm talking about getting a lot of money out of the man! Maybe a — a thousand dollars!"

## MAN CRAZY

Susie looked dazed. She repeated, "A thousand dollars?"

Annie Lou nodded.

"How much would you get?"

"Half."

"You ought not to get half, Annie Lou. After all, I'll be doing all the work."

Annie Lou laughed. "You know nothing of business — and I've learned a lot. In business, it's ideas that pay off, not work. It was my idea and it's my camera. Fifty-fifty, how about it?"

Susie seemed mollified. She looked up the hill toward Murray's house. "He's coming up here tomorrow again to see me from the city." She gave Annie Lou an ingenuous smile. "I don't know what it is, but he surely does like me!"

Annie Lou still was underlyingly angry at Ashley Murray. Ten dollars — for a girl like Susie. She wanted to see him ruined.

The next afternoon, Susie ran down the hill from Murray's house. She joined her sister on the flagstone steps at Carson's. "Well, did you get the pictures? I left the blinds like you said, didn't I? The sun was shinning right in!"

Annie Lou laughed. "I got the pictures, all right."

"Well, what's so damn funny?"

"Him. Murray. Like a daddy-long-legs. That's what's funny." Suddenly, Annie Lou recalled the mirrors in her city bedroom, and old Jake Carson, and her laughter faded. "We'll have to develop these ourselves. I don't trust anyone else."

"How can we do that, Annie Lou?"

Back in Capital City, in the magnificent quarters where Annie Lou lived and worked with a staff of houseboy, cook and secretary, there was all the

## MAN CRAZY

equipment needed. She did not bother explaining that to Susie. Miss Atkins, the secretary, kept a microfilm machine on the premises for reproducing memorandums, directives and records. The equipment was capable of developing any film, even in amateur hands, and of making a print from a negative. Annie Lou, of course, had twenty-four hour access to this equipment. She could handle it alone.

"We'll see Mr. Murray next weekend," she said thoughtfully.

Ashley Murray greeted his guests with pleasure — and a touch, Annie Lou thought, of superiority. "Susie. And Annie Lou. Both of you looking lovely." As though, Annie Lou thought, he expected to get her too—maybe at a cut rate like two for fifteen dollars.

"Mr. Murray," Annie Lou began. Now that she was actually here facing him, she was not quite as brave and bold as she had tried to make Susie think she was. She could feel a slight shaking in her knees. "Mr. Murray, I'm here with Susie to—" She drew herself up and began again. "Do you know what can happen to you for what you've done to Susie, Mr. Murray?" That was better.

"For — for what I've done?" Murray said calmly, but his eyes flicked again from Annie Lou to Susie, who still would not look at him.

"She's under age," Annie Lou went on. "That makes it against the law. You think we're just yokels, Mr. Murray, that you can run all over us without anything happening to you, don't you?"

"I don't understand," he protested. But a sudden bright look of fear showed in his eyes.

## MAN CRAZY

"There's no need beating around the bush," Annie Lou said, warming to the job. "I took some pictures last week, right through your bedroom window, Mr. Murray. They turned out just fine. I don't think I have to tell you what was going on there."

"What is this! What are you up to!" he blustered.

"Pictures, Mr. Murray. We —" Annie Lou paused and looked around at Susie. "We want a — a thousand dollars for them."

For several seconds he said nothing. Then he asked, "Is this true, Susie? Have you really been party to this?"

Susie gripped her sister's arm. "Annie Lou — maybe we ought not —"

"Shut up, Susie," Annie Lou said. Then, to Murray, "It's true, all right. If you want to find out just how true it is, then keep fooling around. Your wife will get some of the pictures, and your bank in Capital City will get some of them. We'll ruin you, Mr. Murray."

Suddenly she was enjoying herself, sadistically, as if her words were a huge whip with which she lashed him. She saw the terror in his face, and she knew she was better than he was, she was better than all of them. She could make them do exactly what she wanted — all of them, but one, the one fool among them who had principles — Peter West.

"I'll — I'll — have to think," he said, his voice low and toneless. "I—I need a drink. Yes. I need a drink right now. Then I can think about this." He turned and went into his house.

Annie Lou followed, with Susie dragging along reluctantly. Murray poured whiskey into a glass and drank it. He poured more and drank that too, as if trying to wash a taste from his mouth. Then he took



## MAN CRAZY

the glass and the bottle and sat down in a chair. He looked at Annie Lou helplessly. "You—you dirty little blackmailing bitch!"

"What do you call yourself, Mr. Murray?" She looked around at Susie, cowering behind her. "A rapist?"

"Annie Lou," Susie whimpered. "Let's go—please—"

"How about the money, Mr. Murray?"

"If I do give you the money, how can I be certain I get all the — the pictures?"

Annie Lou smiled. "You can't be sure. But you can be damned sure what will happen if you don't give us the money."

He sagged, tilted the bottle again, and this time he did not stop until the glass was half filled.

"Can you — can you give me a little time? I want to think."

"What is there to think about?"

"Please. Just a few hours."

"Let's go," Susie whispered to her sister.

"All right," Annie Lou said. She looked at a ship's clock on the wall behind Murray. "It's twelve-thirty now. We'll come back at two."

She turned and went out, Susie tagging along behind.

Outside in the sunlight, Susie said, "Let's tear those pictures up, Annie Lou. Let's tear them up right now and forget about this —"

"Forget about a thousand dollars? And maybe more? Like he said, how can he be sure about getting all the pictures? How can he ever be sure? We can get money from him any time we want to! Now come on. Let's go home and see what Ma has for lunch.

## MAN CRAZY

I'm hungry. And that's the only reason I gave him time to think."

An hour later, at the Goode house, the girls had a visitor. In spite of her claim of hunger, Annie Lou had found she had small appetite for lunch. They were putting dishes away, their attention on the clock when the door flung open and Sarah Townsend ran in, gasping, "Our line is out and somebody has to phone. Tell them to get an ambulance down to the Murray house, quick!"

Susie cried, "What happened?"

"Ashley's had an accident." Sarah turned to go. "I've got to get back — got to have a drink. Fast. Damned fool tried to kill himself."

Annie Lou grabbed the phone. She heard Sarah Townsend driving away.

"Annie Lou! Annie Lou!" Susie threw herself on her knees at her sister's feet. "We killed him!"

"Shut up, Susie! Hello, Hoppersville Hospital? Is that you, Miss Alford? This is Annie Lou Goode. There's been an accident near our place. Can you send the ambulance? Yes ma'am, right away. All right, I'll do just that. I'll wait here at the house and show them the way." She dropped the phone on its cradle. Susie was staring up at her, eyes wide, mouth trembling.

"We've killed him, Annie Lou! We'll go to prison! We'll—"

"I said shut up!" Annie Lou slapped her sister's face. Susie fell back, startled. But the slap stopped the hysteria. The younger girl got to her feet, and began to cry.

"I shouldn't have listened to you, Annie Lou," she sobbed. "Something's happened to you. You're—you're bad. I shouldn't have listened to you."

## MAN CRAZY

Susie went quietly into the bedroom and closed the door behind her just as Esther came indoors. "You girls fighting again? I could hear you hollering clear out in back."

"Mr. Murray's had an accident, Ma. The ambulance is on the way from Hoppersville." She got up and went to the porch to wait for the ambulance.

John Townsend apparently had been waiting also. He came out of the back door of Murray's house when the ambulance pulled up with an intern, a driver and Annie Lou. The two men in white rushed indoors, Annie Lou stayed outside with Townsend. "How is he?" she asked.

"Not as bad as we thought at first. Looks like he was pretty drunk when he did it. Slashed his wrists — and then he either fell or jumped in the lake down there in the cove. Ed Lyle saw him thrashing around and hauled him out." He shook his head. "Cut his wrists. A woman's way. Me — if I ever decide to do it — I'll take the biggest damn gun I can find and stick the barrel in my mouth and —"

"And if you won't pull the trigger, I will," Sarah Townsend said, joining them. "Can't a man even commit suicide without you improving on it?"

Townsend rubbed his chin. "What do you suppose got into him? He never struck me as the type. Everything about Murray always seemed to be so orderly, running on rails."

The two men from the hospital brought Murray out on a stretcher. Annie Lou looked down at him. A blanket was tucked around him so that only his face showed. To her surprise, he was conscious. His eyes fastened on hers, but without expression. His gaze was blank, like the faces of dead people she had seen lying in coffins at funerals, except their eyes

## MAN CRAZY

were closed, and his were not. They were open, wide open, staring at her.

And then they were lifting either side of the cart and rolling him into the ambulance.

Dr. Lyle had followed them out. He turned to Townsend. "I'm going along in the ambulance. How about following? Then you can bring me back."

Townsend nodded. He headed for his car. "Coming, Sarah?"

"No, there's nothing I can do to help. I'll be at the house."

He got into his car and turned around. The ambulance went up to the road and turned right, Townsend's Chrysler following.

Annie Lou watched the two vehicles until they were out of sight around the bend of the road. "Did he — did Mr. Murray say anything? I mean, about why he did it?"

Sarah Townsend looked at her. "You mean, did he leave a note or anything? Not as far as I know." She took a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of the shirt she wore, and lit one. "John and I happened to be driving past when Ed Lyle came running out of the back door. He told us the phone was out of order—and so was our phone—so he sent me up to your mother's to call for help."

Annie Lou nodded. She felt uneasy, as she always did in the presence of this woman. Something about Sarah Townsend gave Annie Lou the feeling that her thoughts were being read. "I—I suppose I may as well go home."

"You knew Ashley was fooling around with that kid sister of yours, didn't you?" It was a statement as well as a question.

Annie Lou was afraid to give a direct answer. "Do

## MAN CRAZY

you—do you think that had something to do with it?”

Unexpectedly, Sarah Townsend put her hand out and touched Annie Lou's arm. "I don't know. But if Susie's involved, you can be sure Murray won't say anything about it. And as for you girls, you'd both do well to keep your mouths shut." She smiled. "I'm afraid this influx from the city has not done the natives a great deal of good."

Annie Lou could not help smiling wanly in agreement with Sarah Townsend. A lot had happened since the dam was built. The rising waters had engulfed more than the land.

## Ten

SHE met Susie as she walked back to the house. The younger girl came to her with panicky eyes.

"I saw the ambulance go past, Annie Lou. He's not—he's not dead, is he?"

Annie Lou shook her head. Susie fell into step beside her. "He'll be all right." She put her arm around Susie and they walked in silence.

After a while Susie said, "What's going to happen, Annie Lou? What will they do to us?"

"Nothing's going to happen. Nothing at all, so stop your worrying."

"We made him do it, didn't we?"

"Yes."

"I—I didn't want to. I told you we ought to tear those pictures up."

"It was my fault, Susie. I was mad, not at him especially, but at all of them. I wanted to do something to hurt them. The idea was mine, the whole thing was my fault."

Susie stopped and turned on her sister. She shook her head. "I didn't mean for you to take all the blame, Annie Lou. If I hadn't got mixed up with him it never would have happened!"

## MAN CRAZY

“Well, I guess we both learned something. We’ll know better next time, huh?”

The shock was beginning to reach Annie Lou. Up until now her efforts had been a sort of game, a game in which the odds had all been against her. But the game had gotten away from her. She had grown more powerful than she realized and she had violated some rule, and as a result a man had almost died.

She heard later that day that Murray would be sent home after emergency treatment at the hospital. And the following morning, the Murrays drove past her house. Murray’s wife was driving, and Murray sat far to the opposite side of the seat. He did not look toward the house and the car was soon out of sight, heading toward the lake.

“Do you think he’s told her anything?” Susie asked Annie Lou.

“That’s not our business, Susie. That’s between the two of them.”

Susie had more than one fear—she was full of fears. “Suppose he tries it again? He doesn’t know we’re not going ahead with what we threatened! He still might actually kill himself, Annie Lou!”

That was true. Murray had no way of knowing they had been frightened out of the plan. “We’ll have to tell him,” Annie Lou said. “We’ll go see him again.”

“But his wife is down there. How can we do it?”

Annie Lou bit her lip. “Maybe their phone is working now. I’ll call him.” She went inside to the telephone, Susie following. The phones at the lake were apparently back in order. It was Murray’s wife who answered. “This is Annie Lou Goode, Mrs. Murray. How is Mr. Murray?”

“He’s doing pretty well, under the circumstances.”

“Would you tell him I called? I called for my sister

## MAN CRAZY

and myself. Tell him we're glad he's not hurt badly and—and—"

"Can't you talk to him?" Susie whispered. "You've got to explain to him, Annie Lou! You've got to!"

"Mrs. Murray—would you tell him that the pictures we took down at your house didn't come out? Tell him we had to—tell him we're throwing them away. Please tell him that, Mrs. Murray."

"I will, dear. And thank you for calling. You're very considerate, both of you."

Annie Lou hung up. People, she thought. What mattered in the end was not the crowd you ran with or how much money you had, but what kind of person you were. Murray's wife—well, she was a wife. Like Ma. And, again like Ma, with sort of a trashy husband.

She went in the bedroom, took some photos from her suitcase, and tore them to bits before replacing them in their paper folder.

"Take this out, Susie," she said. "Throw it in the trash, and burn it."

"All right, Annie Lou." Susie hesitated as Annie Lou, her suitcase on the bed, started to pack.

"You're going back to the city today?"

Annie Lou nodded. "I'll be home again soon, though. I've got—something I want to finish up. Then I think I may quit my job."

Susie brightened. "You're coming home?"

Annie Lou closed the suitcase and snapped it. "I'm coming home."

Annie Lou took her luggage outside and put it into her car. Esther came out of the barn, saw Annie Lou dressed for travel. "You leaving?"



## MAN CRAZY

"Yes, Ma. I—I may be back soon."

Esther nodded. "Any time you want to come home, Annie Lou, you just come on."

Annie Lou felt the tears springing to her eyes. She threw herself against Esther. The thin, strong arms were a comfort. She knew, too, that no explaining was called for, and she simply held on to her mother until she could blink back the tears.

She pulled away. "I—I think I'd like a drink of water before I go."

Esther put her arm around Annie Lou and they walked toward the back door. "Come on and have a cup of coffee, honey."

As they sat in the shabby familiar kitchen they heard a feminine voice out front.

"Is your mother here?"

Billy said, "She's around."

"Will you get her for me? And will you hurry? No, I won't come in."

Billy's bare feet padded in the next room.

"I'm in the kitchen, Billy." Esther rose from her coffee. "Who wants me?"

"Mrs. West." Billy burst into the kitchen, a gleeful smile on his face. "Old Sam Lewis' girl friend."

"Shut your mouth!" Esther said harshly. She went out.

Annie Lou looked through the open door and saw Donna West in the yard. "I'd like to have you wax the floors, Mrs. Goode," she was saying, "the next time you come up to clean."

"Surely, Mrs. West. That'll be Monday."

"Can't you make it sooner?"

"I'll try," Esther promised.

"This afternoon, I hope. I won't be home myself, and Mr. West won't be along till tomorrow."

## MAN CRAZY

Again Esther said she would try.

Donna drove away and Billy nudged Annie Lou. "If she heads toward town, I'll bet she's going to see Sam Lewis."

Annie Lou looked down at him. "How do you know that?"

He shrugged. "Just guessing. I've heard folks talking about 'em, though, about what they do while old man West ain't up here."

Little Carl came in by the back door.

"Let's go fishing, Billy."

"All right." The two boys ran out the back.

Annie Lou paused thoughtfully. Donna West had headed toward Hoppersville. The woman could be heading in that direction for any of a hundred reasons, and none of them Sam Lewis.

But, again . . .

Impulsively, Annie Lou ran out to her own car, waving goodbye to Esther. The other car was not in sight, but a light pall of dust hung over the dirt road, and there was only one way to go.

She did not want to catch up with Donna West, she wanted merely to keep her in sight and find out where she was going. After she had gone a mile or so she saw the other car. Annie Lou slowed, keeping a respectable distance behind. Donna West reached the paved highway, turned toward Hoppersville. She might simply be going to town to do some shopping, Annie Lou said to herself, or to have something done to the car.

But before they reached Hoppersville, the car turned off the highway onto a rough, county-maintained road, and headed north.

In all the years she had known Sam Lewis through his business dealings with her father, Annie Lou had

## MAN CRAZY

never had cause to go to his home. She knew though, that he was a bachelor and lived alone somewhere on this side of Hoppersville.

The car ahead went over the next rise. If she came any closer, Donna West would suspect she was being followed. Annie Lou let the other car disappear on the other side of the hill before her own little Ford climbed the rise. When she came to the crest, the road ahead lay fairly straight through the valley. But there was no sign of Donna's car. Donna could not have disappeared beyond the next ridge in so short a time. She must have turned off somewhere in the valley.

Annie Lou drove down the incline, watching to either side for some sign of a crossroad. She saw a pair of well-used ruts cutting away from the road on her left. She pulled to a stop, got out. There were fresh tire tracks in the dirt, visible for about ten yards. Beyond, there was underbrush. Above her, power and telephone lines branched toward the woods from the poles along the road, indicating the presence of a house. And to the left of the turn-off, almost hidden by a wild shrub, a rural mailbox, in rough, faded letters, bore the name *Lewis*.

The rumor was true. Donna West was seeing Lewis while her husband was gone. Annie Lou started up the dirt road, but before she had gone a dozen steps she paused. Suppose Sam came along and saw Annie Lou's car parked on the road. He would certainly recognize it—he was bound to have noticed it parked in front of the Goode house the past few days.

She went back to the car and drove farther down the road until she found the ruts of an old logging trail on her right. She left the road. Her car jounced over the ground, scraped by branches of heavy un-

## MAN CRAZY

dergrowth. When she was out of sight of the paved road, she parked, got out and started back on foot. A second thought struck her. She went back to the Ford and took her miniature camera from the dash compartment.

Sam Lewis' dirt driveway ran through the woods for a couple of hundred yards around the hill, then opened onto a cleared area on which were a white house and a number of outbuildings. A few chickens scratched about. There stood Sam Lewis' pickup truck, and beside it was Donna's car. But neither Lewis nor Donna West was anywhere to be seen.

Warily, Annie Lou edged into the clearing, keeping one of the outbuildings between herself and the house.

When she was closer to the house, she heard a woman's laugh. She ran across the yard and flattened against the house wall.

She heard Sam Lewis' voice, though she could not make out his words. A window was open a few feet to her right, and she moved quietly toward it.

"—risky business," Lewis was saying. "You don't know nothing about a little place like this. People know things. Sometimes it don't seem like they got to see anything, or hear anything, they just know."

"So you think they—whatever the hell they are—know about us? Is that it?"

"Wouldn't surprise me. 'Course if it don't make no difference to you, it damn sure don't make no difference to me."

Donna West laughed, a rich, suggestive sound. "Men!" she said.

"Me, I'll take women," Sam said. "C'mere."

There was a long silence. Annie Lou rose slowly until she could see in through the window. The door

## MAN CRAZY

of the room was open. Beyond, she saw them. Lewis was sitting in a chair beside a table, and Donna West was on his lap. They were kissing and Donna's hand was twisted in his thick hair. Lewis wore only his trousers, and she a white slip. His powerful arms were about her waist.

They pulled apart and Donna stood up. She smiled, pulled the slip over her head. She wore panties, but no bra, and her large breasts quivered as she moved her shoulders.

"Come on, big man," she said, taking his hand and pulling him up from the chair. She led him toward the open door, and Annie Lou ducked quickly. She stood with her back against the sun-warmed side of the house. She heard the soft padding of bare feet on the floor just inside the window, and then the creak of bedsprings.

She glanced down at the camera tucked in the band of her skirt. Her mere word on what was happening inside would carry no weight, but pictures would. The power that pictures could wield was still very fresh in her mind. She pulled the camera out.

Suppose she were caught? She took a deep breath. No time to think of that. It was a case of now or never. Quickly she checked the camera. The sun was shining into the room and there should be enough light.

She rose to the window sill, lifted the camera to her eye and looked inside. They were on the edge of the bed embracing. The profile of Donna West was perfect. Annie Lou clicked the shutter. The sound seemed loud as a bomb to her, but the couple in the room did not hear. She cocked the camera quickly, took another exposure, and then a third.

She slid down from the window, wondering if she

## MAN CRAZY

had enough, if the pictures taken so far would be compromising enough. Should she wait a few minutes and take more? A movement at the corner of the house caught her eye. She turned quickly and found herself staring straight into the bleary eyes of an old hound. The dog stared back, then growled. Annie Lou in desperation put her finger to her lips and shook her head, but the action only brought a yelping from the hound. He sat on his haunches, threw back his head and began to howl in earnest. From the room inside there was the sound of hasty footsteps.

"Must be somebody out there," she heard Lewis say. "Old Joe don't bark unless he's got a good reason. He don't do nothing he don't have to."

Annie Lou ran. She headed for the drive, the camera gripped in her hand.

"Hey!" Lewis bellowed behind her. "Hey you!"

"Who is it?" A woman's shrill voice.

"By God, I'll get her."

Annie Lou was fast afoot, but Lewis could chase her with the truck. Could she hide in the woods, get past the out-buildings?

Her foot suddenly twisted, her ankle gave way and she sprawled. The little camera flew out of her hand, sliding into the underbrush some half a dozen yards ahead of her. Sam Lewis, barefoot, and wearing only his denim trousers, was pounding toward her across the yard. Beyond him, on the porch of the house, stood Donna West, clad in white panties.

Annie Lou got to her feet too late. The hands grabbed her, hard and unrelenting, and threw her again to the ground. She fell face down. When she rolled over, she saw Sam standing spraddle-legged beside her.

## MAN CRAZY

“Godamighty!” he said. “It’s Annie Lou! What the hell you doing here, girl?”

“Who is it, Sam?” Donna called from the porch.

He called back, “One of Esther Goode’s kids,” then turned his attention back to the girl on the ground. Her skirt was torn and disarrayed, revealing the white edge of her panties. Sam Lewis took it in. “You didn’t just happen by, Annie Lou. What the hell were you doing snooping out here for?”

Donna West came toward them. Recognition showed in her face. “Well, if it isn’t the little farmer’s daughter!”

Annie Lou started to get up, but Donna West kicked out with a bare foot, knocking her to the ground again. “Not yet, honey! I want to know what you were doing. Were you spying on me? Did Peter put you up to this? Answer me!” She kicked Annie Lou in the side. She drew her foot back once more but Lewis stepped in. He took her arm and pulled her back.

“Ain’t no cause to do that.”

She glared at him. “The hell there isn’t! This little bitch is spying on me and I won’t put up with it!”

“How about that, Annie Lou?” Lewis asked.

“How can you do this to Peter?” Annie Lou said to the woman. “You’re married to him! You’re his wife!”

“No, he didn’t get you to do this,” Donna West commented, eyes narrowing. “This is your own idea. You want him, but I’m married to him, is that it? You’re playing detective, trying to get something that’ll let him get a divorce. Well, you’re wasting your time.”

“Why?” Annie Lou said. “Why!”

“Why? You want to know why?” She glanced at

## MAN CRAZY

Lewis, then put one hand lazily through his hair. "I like steak, but I don't want it three times a day every day. I like variety. I like variety in everything I do."

"You better git, Annie Lou," Lewis said. "And you better forget you ever came here, you hear me?"

"Not yet," Donna snapped. "Hold her, Sam. Don't let her get away."

"I don't think she'll say nothing. Wouldn't be nothing but her word against—"

"Did you hear what I said, Sam? Lift her up and hold on to her!"

"But—"

"Do as I say, Sam. If you don't I'll leave here and I won't come back!"

"Now baby—"

"I mean it!"

Lewis sighed and shrugged. He pulled Annie Lou upright by an arm. With her free hand she began to brush the dirt off her clothes.

Suddenly Donna grabbed the nipple of Annie Lou's left breast between her thumb and forefinger. Pinching her fingers together as hard as she could, she twisted at the breast as though trying to wring it off.

Annie Lou screamed. When she tried to pull Donna's hand away, it made the pain that much worse. "Please—" she begged. "Please—"

"Let her go, Donna," Lewis said. "For God's sake, stop that! It hurts me just watching you."

"Hold her other arm, Sam," Donna said, her mouth a thin line across her face, her nostrils dilated. "That's just the beginning."

Lewis hesitated a moment, then stepped behind Annie Lou and pulled back her arms, pinioning them



## MAN CRAZY

behind her. Donna released her hold on her victim's breast and slapped Annie Lou across the face. She brought the hand back across even harder. She continued, back and forth, as hard as she could swing her arm, her own large breasts swinging with each blow, until Annie Lou's face felt afire.

"I'll teach you to spy on me, you little bitch! You little bitch!"

She sank her fist into Annie Lou's stomach, and the girl doubled forward, gagging. She would have fallen if Lewis had not been holding her.

"That's enough, Donna. Let the kid be," he said. He released his grip and Annie Lou tumbled forward, clutching at her stomach, trying to draw a breath. She could feel Donna still kicking her in the ribs, in the side, the back.

"Take her, Sam!" Donna ripped Annie Lou's skirt away. "Take her! Take her!"

"Are you crazy!" he said. "Leave her alone! You'll kill the kid!"

"I said take her! Right here! Right now!"

"Not me! I've done a lot but I never raped nobody!"

He pulled Annie Lou to her feet and stood between her and the raving woman. "You think you can run?" he asked the girl. "I'm going to turn you loose and you light out, you understand?" Annie Lou nodded. He released his grip. "Now git!"

She tried to run, but her feet and legs would not respond as she wanted them to. She staggered across the yard, pain burning in her face, her breast, her side, every part of her.

"Stop her!" Donna screamed.

Annie Lou stumbled toward the road, still hearing Donna screaming behind her, and vaguely realizing

## MAN CRAZY

that Sam Lewis was holding Donna to keep her from further pursuit.

She reached the main road, paused and leaned against a tree, sucking in deep breaths. After a few minutes, she crossed the road and walked to the place where she had hidden the Ford. She got a pair of slacks from her suitcase and put them on. Then she turned the car around and drove, slowly, knowing the car was not traveling in a straight line but powerless to do anything about it. After she had crossed the little valley, topped the rise and started down the other side, she pulled off the road and stopped. She fell forward on the steering wheel, sobs racking her body.

## Eleven

FOR a long while Annie Lou sat slumped on her steering wheel. Waves of nausea swept over her, gradually subsiding. At last she leaned back and started the car again. She drove very slowly until she felt closer to normal, then resumed reasonable speed. At the main highway, she turned right and headed for Capital City.

The brutal blows had somehow cleared Annie Lou's mind. What she really wanted was Peter West, and in her immaturity her drive had taken her far afield. But now she knew her own mind — and that she would have to fight to get what she wanted.

She reached the city and drove directly to the apartment. The staff was having a day off, it seemed. She went to the kitchen, opened a can of soup. As she waited for the soup to warm, she poured a stiff shot of brandy and drank it straight. The alcohol spread a warming glow inside her. She had another brandy and then sat down to her soup.

When she had eaten, she took her suitcase into her bedroom. Very carefully she put away all the clothes that Carson had bought her. She repacked the old suitcase she had first brought from home with the few clothes she had come with. She took off

## MAN CRAZY

the things she wore, stripping down to the skin, and put the soiled clothing in the bathroom hamper. As if to wash all traces away, she stood for fifteen minutes under a steaming hot shower. After drying herself she looked in the mirrored wall of the bedroom. Her breasts had taken on a purplish hue, and there were dark bruises over her sides, hips and thighs where Donna West had vented her fury. The pain was constant, though not intense. She sat down on the bed and then she lay back on the coverlet, intending only to close her eyes for a few seconds before she dressed and left.

Deep in her mind she knew someone was speaking to her. She tried to shut the sound out, but it went on. "Annie Lou? Annie Lou? Wake up." Something was touching her, shaking her gently but persistently. "Wake up. What's happened to you?"

She opened her eyes. The lids felt heavy, as if she would never get enough sleep. "Go 'way," she mumbled, and closed her eyes again.

The shaking was harder, a hand on her stomach. "Come on, wake up!"

She opened her eyes once more. She was on her back on the bed, naked, and Jake Carson was sitting beside her with his hand on her. "Awake now?" he asked.

She tried to sit up. "Got to go. Got to go home."

"Where have you been? What the devil happened to you? You're bruised all over!"

"I want to get up. Got to go home."

"You're not going anywhere until I get some answers! What the hell have you been up to? You look like some kind of a—a sadist had had you." His eyes

## MAN CRAZY

narrowed. "You've been playing around while I was gone, is that it? What'd he do, beat you up and leave you here? You weren't expecting me back so soon, were you?"

"Take your hand off me." She rose on one elbow, but Carson, with surprising firmness, pushed her back on the bed.

"I told you I want some answers, girl! Start talking! What have you been doing while I was out of town?"

"Let me up. I'm leaving here—"

He smiled shrewdly. "It's West, isn't it? It's Peter West. You look surprised, my dear! You don't think I'd leave you by yourself without a few little safeguards, do you? My staff reports on you constantly. For instance, I know you drove out to Huntington Road one night. Shall I tell you who lives on Huntington Road? No?" He looked at her bruised body. "I didn't know he had a streak of this in him, though."

She glared at him. "All right! I am in love with Peter West! But he didn't do this to me. I'm leaving you, Jake. You and I are through! You can take your phoney job and your skinny body, and you know what you can do with them! Now get out of my way or you'll be sorry!"

He looked at her in amazement. Then his face softened, and a forgiving smile spread over it. He took her hands and helped her sit up. "I'm—I'm sorry I spoke to you as I did, my dear. I was—jealous. Now let's kiss and make up, and I'll go mix up a nice drink—"

"I meant what I said, Jake," she said, getting to her feet. She felt her nakedness, felt his eyes on her. She went to the closet for her sheer negligee and draped it over her shoulders.

## MAN CRAZY

"No, Annie Lou. You're tired! You're hurt, that's it! Tired and hurt, and you're talking foolishness! You won't leave me—" He came to her, embraced her.

Annie Lou tried to pull away, but his grip was firm.

"I'll buy you something!" he said, talking fast. "A diamond brooch, that's what! You'll love it, my darling! Diamonds—"

"Jake, turn me loose. There's nothing you can do that will keep me here. I made a mistake, and I know it now. It's over. Done."

He released her and stepped back. A crooked, humorless smile spread over his face. "So you're pulling out, just like that! After all I've done for you, after all the things, the clothes, jewelry, after everything you're just walking out! Lou don't feel you owe me one damned thing, eh?"

"I think you've had your money's worth. Maybe even a little more than your money's worth. It's no fun being owned, Jake, even if you do wear expensive clothes."

"I suppose you're planning to move in with West. Maybe you've forgotten that he has a wife, Annie Lou."

"You've got a wife."

"I can tell you something, my dear girl! Jacob Carson does not simply sit back and see something get away from him. There's many a man right here in this city who will attest to that! Jacob Carson does not —"

"Shut up." Annie Lou said in a tired voice. "For God's sake, shut up."

"You think West will have you now? You're soiled. You're dirty! And if West doesn't suspect that,

## MAN CRAZY

then I will make it my personal business to see that he finds out!"

Her sudden look of alarm brought another smile to his face, a smile of satisfaction, of knowing he had hit a vulnerable spot. "He'll have all the lurid details."

Looking at him, she knew argument was useless, in fact, worse than useless. Argument was what he wanted.

"Will you please leave?" she said. "I want to get dressed. Maybe I am dirty, Jake, just as you say. But I feel filthy when you look at me, so please go. Go find yourself somebody else. There must be thousands of girls looking for the easy life. Get one of them, bring her here and put her in your little mirrored cage, and forget about me."

Suddenly his eyes reflected loss. After a moment he turned and walked down the hallway. Annie Lou followed him. She said, "I'll leave the car at your place at the lake, if that's all right."

"Leave it any damned place you please!" he snapped, and walked stiffly away.

Esther made no comment when Annie Lou parked beside the chinaberry tree and walked up to the house swinging her battered old suitcase. At the bottom porch step, she put her arms about her daughter. The suitcase fell to the ground while Annie Lou embraced her mother. The sky was bright with stars, and the night reminded Annie Lou of one long ago, after they had taken her father to the graveyard and buried him.

"It's good to be home, Ma," she said.

"I know, baby. I know." Esther patted her and

## MAN CRAZY

stepped back. "Now you come in the house. I put you some supper up just in case you came tonight. You eat something, and then you go to bed. You look like you need sleep, child."

Annie Lou smiled weakly. "I do feel a little tired, Ma."

Annie Lou awoke early the next morning. Her bruises were tender and sore as she dressed quietly, trying not to wake Susie. When she was dressed she went into the kitchen to make coffee. She was surprised to find Esther already there, the coffee brewed.

"Good morning, Ma," she said. She poured herself a cup of coffee from the ancient pot.

"I thought you might want to sleep late this morning, Annie Lou."

"I—I've got something to do. I wanted to get started early."

She sat at the kitchen table across from her mother, took a swallow of the scalding liquid. "Ma—Ma, I'll tell you all about it some day. But not right now."

Esther shook her head. "You don't have to tell me anything, baby."

"I know I don't have to. But, I think I want to."

"Whenever you're ready, Annie Lou."

The girl nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She finished her coffee. "I've got to go now. I'll be back soon."

"I'll fix you some breakfast when you get back."

Annie Lou drove toward Hoppersville. She had gone less than a mile when she passed Sam Lewis' truck headed the other way. That was a break in her favor. He would be away from his house.

She slowed when she reached the cut-off to Lewis' house. The morning sun was bright on his hillside



## MAN CRAZY

clearing surrounding the house. She pulled to one side and got out of her car, trying to remember where she had fallen and where the camera would be.

The hound appeared beside the porch, barking halfheartedly at her, as if it were something he had to do, but was not particularly interested in.

Annie Lou ignored him and began to browse in the undergrowth. She searched vainly for several minutes, wondering if Lewis had seen the camera fly from her hand and had already retrieved it.

A glint of metal caught her eye. She brushed the leaves aside, snatched up the camera and ran back to the car.

She heard a motor. Sam Lewis was coming home. She was trapped. There was only one way out. Quickly, she drove behind the house, and waited for Sam's pickup truck. When she realized he had arrived and come to a stop, she pushed down on the accelerator. The Ford shot around the house spewing dirt and pebbles and sliding wildly as it cornered behind the truck. She caught a glimpse of Sam, a startled look on his face. She was soon past him. In the rear view mirror she saw him standing beside the truck, scratching his head with one hand. She jack-rabbed through the woods.

She reached home, took her roll of film from the camera.

Susie came across the yard, saw the camera, and frowned. "Where you been so early, Annie Lou?"

Annie Lou dropped the roll into the pocket of her jeans. "Don't worry. This isn't the same as last time. What time do you reckon it is?"

"About eight."

"You haven't seen Pete—Mr. West come by yet, have you?"

## MAN CRAZY

Susie, puzzled, shook her head.

"Well, it's still early," Annie Lou said. She ate the breakfast Esther prepared, then sat on the porch and waited. The time seemed to drag, but she stayed at her post.

"Can you tell me why you're looking for Mr. West, Annie Lou?" Susie asked. A curious mutual respect had sprung up between the two girls since the Ashley Murray incident.

"I'm not too sure myself. I'll—I'll let you know later."

"Well, whatever it is, you don't have to wait any more." Susie pointed down the road.

The black Thunderbird passed in front and turned down toward the lake.

"That was him," Susie said hopefully.

Annie Lou frowned in perplexity. She knew what she wanted to do, but now that the time was here, she did not feel at all sure that she could go through with it.

"That was him, Annie Lou," Susie repeated. "That was Peter West."

"I know." Annie Lou got up and walked slowly out to the yard. She drove down the lake road and parked behind Jacob Carson's house. She left the camera in the car.

She walked toward Peter West's house. She felt, not guiltless, but clean. It was as if a great oppressive weight had been taken from her, something that had been carrying her inevitably downward, with each step making it more difficult to turn back.

Strangely, she felt no animosity toward Carson. He had merely followed a pattern of obviously long standing. She had allowed herself to be caught. She had mistaken her goal momentarily.

## MAN CRAZY

She looked down the slope toward West's. There was the real goal. When she pushed the door chime, she had a sudden strong desire to run away. But the door swung open, and there before her stood Donna West.

"What the hell are you doing here!" Donna whispered. She looked scared.

"I want to see him. I want to talk to Peter."

"You little fool! You want to tell him about yesterday? You think he'll believe you!" She started to slam the door, but Annie Lou stopped her.

"I'm going to see him," Annie Lou insisted. "And I don't believe you can stop me, Mrs. West. Sam's not here to hold me this time."

"Who is it?" West called from inside the house.

"It's nobody," Donna West said.

"It's Annie Lou, Peter. I want to talk to you."

"You dirty little bitch—" Donna West's eyes were flashing with terror.

Annie Lou pushed past her and walked through the kitchen. West met her in the living room, surprise on his face.

Annie Lou's heart sank. She hardly knew how to start.

It was Donna who spoke first. "I tried to stop her, Peter. The poor child had an infatuation for you. I've known that since I first saw her. I've met some of the people who live up here. They're no good, any of them. They're slothful, lying, deceitful—"

"That's enough, Donna," West said abruptly. "Hello, Annie Lou."

"Hello, Peter."

"Did you want to ask me something?"

She nodded and looked at Donna.

## MAN CRAZY

"The little slut has come here to tell lies, Peter!" Donna burst out.

West looked patient—and accustomed to outbursts.

"They're not lies, Peter," Annie Lou said. "What I have to say is the truth. You may hate me for it, but I'm not lying. It's about—about her." She pointed at Donna, and her finger shook. "You told me once that wanting a divorce was not enough. Well, if she's been—if she's been going to bed with another man, is that enough?"

Donna screamed an obscenity and hurled herself at Annie Lou. Annie Lou dodged. The woman went by her and stopped, breathing hard. "Are you going to believe the fantastic lies of this little—this little—"

"Donna, that's enough," he said.

"It's her word against mine. These people are born liars! They had rather lie than eat! It's in their blood! They like trouble, and they'll do anything to stir it up!"

Annie Lou realized the woman was fighting with everything she had. "It's more than my word, Mrs. West."

"All right, so you've got some of your country friends to back up whatever you say. But two lies do not make a truth. Now get out of here! Go back to that little hovel up the hill and keep away from us!"

Annie Lou took the roll of film from her pocket. "I took some pictures through the window out at Sam's yesterday. These are the films, Mrs. West. Would you like me to have them developed? Would you like to see yourself as I saw you?"

Donna stared in disbelief. Then she laughed, but the laugh was forced. "Just another lie, that's all."

"That's easily proven. All we have to do is take

## MAN CRAZY

this film to town and have it developed. Shouldn't take long."

"Peter?" Donna West looked beseechingly at her husband. "Peter, are you going to stand there and let her talk to me like this? Are you?"

"Yes I am, Donna. In fact, I believe every word Annie Lou has said."

"You—you believe *her!* You believe—" She broke off, a crafty look stole over her distorted features. "I've guessed what was going on before I came back to you. The little mountain blossom was irresistible, wasn't she? All right, I'll forgive you. What you and she did before I came back is just so much water over the dam. I—"

"Just why did you come back to me, Donna?" West asked. "It wasn't because you loved me. Was it because word got out that I was beginning to do all right financially? Was that it?"

Donna had stopped listening to him. She darted forward, snatched the roll of film from Annie Lou, and ran. Annie Lou caught her in the kitchen. She grabbed the back of Donna West's dress, ripping it down to the waist, and then she was on the woman, scratching and hitting. The fight was a short one, and Annie Lou got up clutching the film in her hand.

Donna West got slowly to her feet. She glared with hatred, but said nothing. Then she looked at Peter, who had come from the living room and was standing in the doorway. She started to speak, but suddenly she seemed to shrink. Defiance and hatred left her face and in their place was defeat. She went out of the kitchen door. Soon they heard a car drive away. The sound faded and was gone.

Annie Lou looked at West. "I—I didn't want to do it this way, Peter. I—I—" She moved to him and put

## MAN CRAZY

her face against his chest. She stood there for some time with her eyes closed, feeling his arms about her. Without opening her eyes, she said, "I missed you. I love you."

"That's a very lucky thing," he said, "because I've missed you too."

She looked up quickly. "Peter—I've done some bad things. I—"

"Whoa, now. Whatever we've done—either of us—is better forgotten. It's what happens from now on that counts."

"I—I want to tell you. Will you listen? Will you?"

"If you want me to, yes."

She laid her head against his chest again, and started talking. She told him about Uncle Amos, after her father's funeral, and Mr. Burrows, her high school teacher—and the others. She paused when the list was finished, and then she asked, "Do you still love me?"

"I told you it made no difference what happened before, and I meant it. You don't think I've been some kind of saint, do you?"

She smiled. "No, I suppose not." She added, more soberly, "What about Donna?"

"Are your pictures what you say they are?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll turn them over to a lawyer. She won't put up a fight under the circumstances."

She pulled herself close against him. "I'm probably just what she said, a shameless little bitch, but I—I want you, Peter. I want you now. Last time—in Capital City—we wanted to hurt each other. But love between you and me should have no hurt."

"I know," he said softly. His lips touched her face.

## MAN CRAZY

He lifted her in his arms and started toward the bedroom.

“Darling?” she said. “Please—not in there. Not where you slept with her.”

He stopped and looked into her eyes. “No?”

She shook her head. “I know a place. Out there in the lake, a little island.”

“I know a place too,” he said. He kissed the tip of her nose and carried her out to the patio, then turned down the hill toward the boathouse. Annie Lou looked up at the bright blue sky. It was going to be a fine day.

THE END

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