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PLEASURE GROUND

by **ORRIE
HITT**

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PLEASURE GROUND

by

ORRIE HITT



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PLEASURE GROUND

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PLEASURE GROUND

CHAPTER ONE

I looked across the field, over into the scrub that was growing up in the next farm—if you could call it a farm any more—and I saw the girl walking toward the woods. From that distance I couldn't tell much about her, not with the sun so bright, but I knew what she was like all right. I'd met her once at a town dance—Flint Collins, my boss, had busted his heart and given me a ticket—and we'd danced a couple of times. The only reason we hadn't danced more had been my own fault. This girl, this Lucy Martin, was blonde and lovely and she had the build of those nude girls you see in the men's magazines. Long hair and smokey eyes, breasts that were big and full and ripe, a stomach that was almost nothing at all and hips that made your blood pressure leap above normal when she moved.

"You're big," she had told me that night. "You're the biggest man here."

Well, I am big and looking down at her from my six feet six she had seemed about the size of a dwarf, hardly taller than my former wife Emily had been. Only I hadn't figured her to be like Emily inside. No girl could be that bad.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead and watched the blonde disappear into the trees. One of the men who worked on the farm with me, Clem Foster, said she went swimming every afternoon in Cold Brook. I didn't know very much about that but I did know that she lived alone, had a cow, and held down a position as a night nurse at the hospital in town. The town was Circleville, ten miles away, and I couldn't understand why she continued to live out there by herself, keep a cow, which was a nuisance, and drive all that distance five or six nights a week. Still, I guess people do what they want and, except for meeting her that one night, I knew as much about her business as I know about yours. That kind of leaves

me with nothing.

I pulled the barbed wire down to the last post, drew it tight with the stretcher and stapled the thing solid. Then I cut the wire and hoped that Flint Collins wouldn't scream because I hadn't gotten twice as much mileage out of the roll of wire as possible. For my money, and I didn't have much of it, he was a slob.

"He's a hard man," Art Weber had told me when I had come to work about six weeks before. "Low pay and mean."

Weber, along with Clem Foster and myself, was the other hired man. He was about thirty, sort of a nice guy, and he had a wife and a couple of kids somewhere. He sent them money out of his pay but he said his wife had to work because what he sent wasn't enough. He lived with Foster in one of the two rooms over the garage and he claimed that during the winter he almost froze to death. As for myself, I lived in the main house and I wasn't worried about the winter. By the time the weather got cold my job would be done and I'd have to look for something else. That didn't worry me either. For over a year now I'd been just sort of banging around and not staying any one place very long. But I still sent fifteen bucks a week to the welfare department for the kid that hadn't been mine. It wasn't for Emily that I did it. I did it for the kid. The kid couldn't help what he was. My parents hadn't been married and I'd been brought up in foster homes. I knew what it was like to be all alone in the world with a whole lot of people around you and only a few who care.

I glanced at the fence and it seemed to be all right to me. Of course it wasn't my job to build fences or work in the fields or barn but I did it when I couldn't paint on the house or any of the other buildings. That morning it had rained, rain left over from the night before, and Collins had sent me down to finish this project. He'd wanted me to paint but I'd talked him out of it, saying that if I put the stuff on over wet boards it would blister and peel and it wouldn't last.

"You should have fanned your butt around here," Collins had shouted at me. "I wanted this house nice for my wife and all you've got is part of it done."

None of us had ever seen his new wife and we had

only been told that she was younger than he was. Collins was fifty so that could have been almost any age. He had met her on a cattle buying trip, married her and she was arriving on the bus the next morning. Whenever we were eating and her name was brought up he merely said that we'd better watch ourselves when she got there and that suited me fine. I didn't want to have anything to do with her.

"I hope she's decent," Norma Collins had said. "And I hope she isn't lazy."

Norma was the daughter and her father hadn't been home to eat at the time she'd made that statement. All of us felt sorry for Norma. She was nineteen, far from being pretty although her shape wasn't bad, what you could see of it, and Collins worked her like a horse. If it was a good day for hay he told her to have cold cuts for lunch and he made her help in the fields. Almost any other girl would have left home but she had been doing this since the death of her mother and she just stayed on. She had about as much future as the stock market in a depression.

It was still early in the afternoon, about three, and for a second I thought about looking up Collins and asking what else I could do. Then I decided against it. I was supposed to be the painter, not a field hand, and for forty a week, plus my board, he was getting a bargain. The only reason I'd taken the job was because I had been broke and I hadn't cared much what I did. Once it hadn't been that way. I'd made big money in construction, following the trade south in the winter so that I wouldn't be out of work, but Emily had gone crazy with money and it hadn't done any good. We'd even lost our trailer because we couldn't pay on it.

"I'm going overseas," I had told her the night they hauled the trailer away. "There's big dough in that and in a year we'll be on our feet."

"Honey, I'll miss you."

"Yeah, but who can live on love?"

Getting a job hadn't been hard but there had been a gimmick to it that I hadn't fully appreciated at the time. The country in which I had worked had forbidden cash payments to American employees—a hedge against the black market in dollars — and the money had been

sent home to my bank. The company had insisted that a married man have a joint account with his wife, which assured her of an income while he was gone. I had talked it over with Emily and she had promised to live cheaply and save. I should have known better. After a year of desolation and long hours I'd come home to a filthy apartment, a bank account that she'd overdrawn and she'd been pregnant by another man.

"I'm sorry, Bert," she had said. "It's the old story. I got too lonely and the money was there. Things just went to pot."

I'd stayed with her for a while after that, getting what work I could, and I'd been at the hospital for the birth of the baby. Life had been fair for about three months after that but one afternoon I'd come home early because some of the equipment had broken down and she'd been on the davenport in the living room with the one who had been taking from her what he wanted. Like I say, I'm big and the man had been scared but I hadn't done anything to him or to her. I'd simply packed my things and walked out. For the most part I'd been walking ever since, looking for something that I still hadn't found. Of course there had been a divorce and while I no longer loved her there were moments when I wondered who was having her. Whoever it was wouldn't be disappointed. She'd always been good that way, so good that I'd married her when I'd been nineteen and I'd gone through several years of hell for it. Now the hell was done with and there wasn't anything left except a forty dollar a week job for a farmer who could bellow as loud as the bull he owned.

I glanced in the direction of the house but I couldn't see it because of a rise in the ground. I knew that Collins and the other two men were busy cutting clover in the west field and that nobody would come down to check on me. For all they could tell I had hung myself in the barbed wire.

Somehow my glance moved toward the woods and I thought about the blonde. When I had met her at the dance I had liked her right off and that had scared me. After the second dance, her body moving in close and soft, I had excused myself and walked back to the farm. I didn't want to like any girl. The day I left Emily I

had told myself that if there was ever another one it would be for money, cash on the line. There were no ties to a deal of that sort, no obligation. You loved at night and forgot in the morning.

"She won't," Clem Foster had told me. "Don't tell Collins but I went over there on her night off, taking beer, and she just wouldn't. She had a beer with me but she wouldn't even let me kiss her. Take it from me a guy who gets that is going to have more woman than he knows what to do with."

Naturally, I hadn't said anything to Collins about Foster having gone to visit her. What Foster did was up to him and Flint Collins hated the girl. From what I had heard he wanted to buy her farm and she wouldn't sell. That, because he was so used to having his own way, had made him sore. He could get madder faster than any man I had ever seen. If a cow laid down in the barn and wouldn't get up when he wanted her to he almost broke his foot kicking her. Of the hundred cows that he had, I was willing to bet that all of them had been kicked at least once.

I thought of going down to Cold Brook, of finding her at the pool and talking to her some, but I shook my head. The pool was nice for a small stream, deep and cold, but there were rocks all over the bank on either side and it was tough walking. I had been down there three or four times and I had wondered about the old wicker chair that sat out in the sun. It was the kind of chair you see on a lot of porches, low back and flaring arms, but it was certainly out of place in the woods. When I had mentioned it at supper one night nobody had known anything about it.

No, I told myself, I wouldn't bother about the blonde. She was just another girl, wasn't she?

Still . . .

Flint Collins called his farm Lonely Acres and it was lonely all right. Ten miles to town and no way to get there unless you hitched a ride or Clem Foster was going in with his old Ford. Usually you could get to the town but it was coming back that hurt. There were hardly any cars traveling at night, only some kids looking for a place to park and they wouldn't give you the right time if you had to catch a train. There was a bar out at

the main road, about two miles, but with the kind of money I had left over after I sent a check to the kid I couldn't go there very much. Girls came out from town or a few farm girls sneaked off to have a beer and they were most every night and he liked to brag that he had slept with half of the girls in the township. Maybe he had. He didn't care what a girl was like as long as she said yes.

"So I'll get one of them into trouble," he had said. "So what? So there are other farms and I can pull out of here in five minutes."

A light breeze stirred the leaves on the trees and there were clouds forming to the east. Rain, possibly. If it rained while Collins had that clover down he'd sue the weather bureau. Every morning he listened to the forecast on the radio and when it was wrong he went completely nuts.

Lucy Martin . . .

Blonde, beautiful . . .

What, I asked myself, was the harm of following her? After work there was nothing to do on the farm except stop up to Weber's room and listen to him gripe about his kids needing things that he couldn't afford. Foster was seldom around and when he was I got tired of him talking about the last girl he'd had, his gutter language leaving out no details. And it was worse to spend an hour with Collins. He bitched about the price of paint and why didn't I mix my own with white lead? That left only Norma and she had the personality of an old mop in a fashion show.

I started walking toward the woods.

I didn't want anything from the blonde. Maybe I had been a little hasty that night at the dance. Just because a man became friendly with a girl didn't mean that he was going to sleep with her. And, as Foster had said, she wasn't that kind. She was a nice girl, living a strange life perhaps, but a nice girl just the same.

The woods were thick and the bugs found the sweat on my body right away. I was stripped to the waist and of course that gave them plenty of territory in which to work.

I walked on. Maybe she wouldn't want to talk to me. Who was I to interest a girl? I was Bert Forbes, twenty-five years old and a nobody. A nobody who had been kicked out of one foster home for something that I shouldn't have done. A nobody who had married another nobody and who supported a child who carried my name but didn't have a drop of my blood.

The stream was about a quarter of a mile into the woods and you had to go down a steep cliff to get to the pool. Close to the ledge of rocks the oak trees gave away to towering pines and walking on the carpet of brown needles was quiet and easy. I thought of whistling, to let her know someone was coming, but I didn't. I don't know why. It was just an idea and probably I didn't see any point to it.

Five minutes later I stood on the edge of the cliff and I saw plenty.

I saw more than I should have seen.

And I saw what the old chair was for.

She was in the chair, nude all the way, her head thrown back, her blonde hair hanging down in long waves. The chair was in the sun and the heat from it washed over her. Her legs were straight out in front, her stomach sucked in as though somebody had punched her, her firm breasts that were tipped with red thrusting proudly upward.

I felt guilty, finding her that way, and I wanted to run but I couldn't. You go to a girlie show in a carnival and you pay for a thing like that, getting up close to the platform if you aren't embarrassed, but you don't dream of coming across such a scene along a stream in the woods. Anyway, those carnival girls, for the most part, are tired, their bodies the property of many men, and this girl was fresh and alive. I had thought Emily was beautiful but the girl who lay in the chair had her stopped in a dozen different ways.

I don't know how long I stood there but I do know when she let out a little squeal and snatched up a large towel.

"You lousy sneak!" She covered herself with the towel. "How cheap can you get?"

I had the urge to leave but I knew that I couldn't do it. It hadn't been deliberate on my part and I didn't want

anybody to think I was that type. I began climbing down the rocks.

She was on the opposite side of the pool and I crossed on the lower end, wading through the water. The water came up to my knees but I didn't care. I'm no peeper and I wanted to tell her that I wasn't.

"You must have had a cheap thrill for yourself," she said bitterly as I approached the chair. The towel was so big that it hid everything but her legs below her knees. "And if you think it was an invitation for anything else put the invitation under a rock."

"I'm sorry," I said, standing over her and looking into her face, seeing the anger in her eyes. "I thought I was rude to you at the dance and I only wanted to apologize. I had no way of knowing that you wouldn't be swimming or that you wouldn't be wearing a suit."

She thought about that for a moment.

"Well, all right." She smiled faintly. "Nobody has ever come down here at this time of the day before."

"I did."

"Yes, you did." She sat up straighter, hugging the towel to her naked body. "And you don't have to apologize about the dance. I thought I didn't follow you well enough or that you didn't like the music. They never get the really good numbers in the juke box."

I sat down on a rock.

"No, it wasn't that." She was close and I could smell her over the faint trace of perfume. "I can't tell you what it was." I couldn't, not with words that would have sounded right. "Maybe the next time I won't leave you."

She didn't say there would be a next time but she did ask for a cigarette when I lit one. I lit two and passed it over to her.

"Flint Collins would fire you if he knew you weren't working," she told me.

"I suppose he would but he couldn't hire a painter for what he pays me."

"He wants everything, doesn't he?"

"I don't know what he wants."

She inhaled deeply of the smoke.

"I sun myself down here almost every day," she said.

"Then I'll stay away from here after this." I didn't know whether I would or not.

"I can't do it up at the house because it's too near the road. For a while I tried finding a place on the rocks but it was too uncomfortable. So I brought this old chair down here."

From where I sat I could look into the pool. A trout moved upstream. Weber had said there were a lot of fish in Cold Brook but I'd never had any desire to fish it.

"You're a nurse," I said.

"How do you know?"

"Somebody told me. Like it?"

"Not as well as the farm. That's why I stay out here, to get away from people who are sick and forget about them. Becoming a nurse was my mother's idea."

"And she's dead?"

"They're both dead. They wanted a vacation and it was the first one they ever took. They were flying to Florida and the plane went down. Everybody was killed."

"Insurance?"

"None. They didn't take out those policies you can buy from machines but there are suits against the airline. Nobody knows when or if they'll ever be settled. But the money, if it comes, doesn't mean much to me. It's losing them that counts."

She was looking off, like she was thinking of the past, and I studied her. The towel was tight across her breasts and they rose and fell. Only the towel stood between her and nothing. And she couldn't stop me if I tried. I was too big for her, too strong, but I couldn't do that. You have to treat a nice girl nice.

"Collins got married again," I said for no reason at all.

"So I heard. She'll be a slave and he'll kill her just like he killed his first wife. With work. Sooner or later he kills everybody that way." She paused and turned her head toward me. "But he may not kill you. I'd say that you're too much man for him."

I wished that I was man enough for her. Seeing her the way I had in that chair, nothing hidden, had changed my mind about wanting a woman only for money. Why not take what I could get if I could get it? In the fall I'd be moving on and it didn't have to be serious between us.

"What about Saturday night?" I asked her. "Isn't that your night off?"

She flipped her cigarette into the water.

"Collins wouldn't like it and you know that. He wouldn't like it if he knew you had danced with me."

"It doesn't matter to me what Collins likes."

"Your job matters."

"Jobs like he has are a dime a dozen. Or cheaper."

"He may be going to the Town Hall. He almost always does. It gives him a chance to sound off but nobody listens to him."

"There's that bar on the highway," I said. "I don't have a car," I added. "With what I make I couldn't buy the wheel off of one."

She frowned and let her eyes wander over me. She moved her legs and I remembered Emily's legs, her body twisting and frantic on the bed, her pleas filling the room as she asked for the light to be left on.

"Well," Lucy Martin said.

"I can't spend much." She might as well know that at the start.

"I—well, I wasn't thinking of that. It's only—oh, I don't know. Maybe it's because of what you saw from up there on the cliff."

"I've forgotten it already," I assured her. But I hadn't. Who could? "That mistake is history."

She thought about it a long time.

"I don't want to cause you any trouble," she said.

"Let me worry about that."

"And I seldom go out."

I could tell that her resistance was growing weaker.

"It's time you did. Sitting in the house all alone isn't any way to live."

"Well—"

"A few beers, some dancing and that's all there is to it."

She looked away from me.

"I guess it would be all right," she said finally. "You could walk down the road about eight and I'll pick you up."

"Okay. Fine."

I didn't stay with her long after that. I had to get back to the farm and she couldn't get dressed with me around.

Sweat poured off of me as I climbed the rocks.

But it wasn't from the heat.

It was something else.

PLEASURE GROUND

CHAPTER TWO

It was raining again the next morning and Flint Collins cursed all through breakfast. Of course we had already milked the cows and taken care of them and he had cursed out in the barn, too. One of the cows had refused to get up and he had kicked her like some savage.

"You can blame it on those miserable bombs they used to set off," he declared, his mouth full of bacon and eggs. "They screwed up the weather and I hope they're satisfied."

Norma Collins moved around the kitchen. She never ate with us and she wasn't a part of anything, never voicing much of an opinion. If you wanted her to talk you had to talk first. Even then she sometimes didn't answer.

"We can work on the equipment in the shed," Art Weber suggested. "You can't say that it doesn't need it."

Collins gave him a hard look.

"My equipment is all right, Weber."

"Yeah," Clem Foster said lazily. "Ten years ago it must have been great."

"Shut your idiot mouth," Collins roared. Some of the bacon and eggs came flying out of his mouth and across the table. "You know as much about farming as I do about being president." He stuffed more food into his mouth. "Besides, if you fellows weren't so lazy we would have had that clover in before this. Twenty years ago I could have cut it myself and carried it up to the barn in baskets. So where is it? Out in the damn rain."

Nobody said anything. Nobody ever did when he got this way. Foster might needle Collins some but then he would back off before any damage had been done. Weber never did that but tried to be helpful. He was unhappy with the money that he got but he was afraid to make a change. As for Foster he was having a good time nights and that's what he lived for. I rarely joined in the discussions. If it was clear I painted but otherwise I did as

I was told. That morning I had helped with the milking without being asked. I'd been awake early, thinking about the blonde, and I'd wanted something to do.

The phone rang and Norma answered it. She kept saying yes, yes, yes, and then hung up.

"That was Mr. Wilcox," she told her father. "He's got a cow that he's bringing over for the bull. About noon."

"What the hell is the matter with you?" Collins shouted. "You know my wife is coming in on the bus."

"He said it was the only time he could come," Norma said patiently, yet scared. "One of the other men can take care of it."

"That tears it," Collins stormed. "He already owes me for one service and he isn't going to stick me for another. I'll have to stay here and square that crumb off. Either he pays money or no bull."

Collins had a good bull for breeding, one of the best, a big, giant of an animal that was registered. He got high fees for the bull and the bull was as busy as a sultan in a harem.

He calmed down after a while and he decided that Foster and Weber could work on the equipment under the shed. True to form he told them that it was a waste of time and that they were too ignorant to fix what was wrong anyway.

"You go in for my wife," he said to me. "The bus gets in at ten to twelve and you be there. I don't want her standing out in no rain."

"How will I recognize her?"

"That's an insane question. She's a woman, Forbes. How do I know what she'll be wearing?"

"You wouldn't but you know the color of her hair."

"Oh, that. It's black."

We got the mail early at the farm and there was an envelope for me. It was from the county agency where I made the payments for the kid. I tore it open. I'd sent a money order the last time and the money order was inside. Nothing else. Just the money order. I didn't understand it but if they didn't want my money it was all right with me.

I had painted the bedroom which Collins was to occupy with his new wife but there were still a few things to touch up and I was taking care of them when Norma

called upstairs for me to come down to the phone. I wiped my hands on a rag. I didn't have the faintest idea who it might be. Nobody had ever called me at the farm.

I soon found out.

It was Emily. I uttered an oath and asked her where she was.

"In town," she said. "Circleville."

"Look, leave me alone. I've got better things to do than to talk to you."

"You still mad?"

I'm not happy. And I don't know how you found me. I wouldn't write to you if it would add five years to my life."

"I got it from the county agency," she said. "You put your return address on your envelopes and they made a note of it. Simple, huh?"

"They're simple. I just got my last money order back."

I listened to her heavy breathing over the phone.

"He's dead, Bert. The baby's dead."

"Huh."

"You heard what I said." Her voice sounded dead, too. "He's gone. There just isn't any baby any more. Gone, Bert. Like he had been ninety and it was time for him."

I didn't feel so provoked with her just then. The baby hadn't been mine but I had liked the little fellow. Born in tragedy and now she was telling me that he no longer lived. She was no good but I understood that she felt the loss. Any woman who was at all human would feel it. Maybe a woman suffers over a thing like that more than a man.

"That's too bad," I mumbled.

"Kind words." She was scornful.

I got mad all over again.

"Gee, what do you want from me?" I inquired hotly. "It wasn't my fault. I've been doing what the lawyer said for me to do. I could have fought you in court but I didn't. I've done more than some men do."

"Bert," she said. "Bert, I want to see you."

"No."

"But—Bert!"

"Emily, be reasonable. Were done and that's all there is to it. Sure, I'm sorry about the boy—"

"It'll save you fifteen dollars a week."

I felt like ripping the telephone cord out of the wall.

"Don't be nasty. And drift on, will you?"

"I'm staying. I've got a job."

"Then I can't make you."

"In the diner. Days this week—I'm supposed to be on the counter now—and twelve noon until eight after that. It could be worse, only I keep thinking of the boy. It rips my insides out when I think about him. It—"

I hung up on her. It was a cruel thing to do maybe but I couldn't help it. We were finished. What was there left for us?

Back upstairs I returned to work in the room. I hadn't been at it very long when Collins came in. He got into some of the fresh paint, just enough to mark one hand, and he blew the spokes out of his wheel. He told me to get the hell out. I shrugged and picked up my things.

"I don't want this stink of paint in here tonight," he said, his temper cooling off. "There wasn't even time for me to sleep with her after the marriage. You think I want to stumble over a bucket of paint on my first night?"

"Okay, okay. If you'd buy that odorless paint you wouldn't notice it."

"Costs too much."

"So you get the odor."

He walked over to the big bed that he would share with his wife.

"You'd better get into town," he said. "I don't want you leaving late and driving fast. You think I'd be happy if you threw a rod and I had to buy a new car?"

"Cripes, no."

I didn't change before I left for town. I was hired help and it didn't matter much how I looked.

The car wasn't new, a Pontiac station wagon, but it was in good condition and the sound of the motor was a mere whisper of power. I drove slow until I got to the highway, then pushed the gas down. The bar was on the right and it didn't impress me as representing any huge investment. Actually, it was an old house and the guy who owned it must have been as old as the building. He wore a hearing aid and when the noise got too much for him he turned the thing off. After that you were lucky to get a drink. I'd heard he had money but I'd heard

that about Collins, too. If they did have money they were both hanging onto it.

It was raining harder when I reached Circleville and I stopped at the bus station. Inside I inquired about the bus and was informed that it was an hour behind schedule. Something, the man behind the counter explained, had gone wrong with the bus on the run and another one had been put into service. This had caused the delay.

I called the farm and got Collins on the phone. He was furious. Probably he figured he was losing an hour of my time. He was still swearing as I replaced the receiver and walked out to the station wagon.

Emily hadn't told me the name of the diner where she was working but there was only one in town—Circleville was a very small place—and I rode over there. I was beginning to think that I had been too abrupt with her on the phone—I hadn't even inquired as to how the boy had died—and since there was time for me to kill I could at least talk to her.

They called the place a diner but it looked more like a railroad car that had left the tracks and landed alongside the road. The exterior was in need of paint, the windows small, and a big pipe stuck up from the roof. In most locations such a mess would have failed but in that town the people didn't give appearance a second thought. Clem Foster went there frequently and he said that on some nights you could pick up a pretty good number.

She was in back of the counter as I entered—the counter was empty—and she hadn't changed to any great extent. Her face was still pretty, perhaps a little fuller than it had been, and her brown hair was neat and hooked behind her ear on one side. The uniform was undoubtedly one of her own because she had hopped tables and counters before and she liked them tight. This one was tight, curved over her breasts, the top just low enough to make a guy stick on his stool for a second cup of coffee.

"Thanks for cutting me off," she said.

"You're welcome." I sat down. "Any time."

"You want coffee?"

"If its free."

She got the coffee.

"You've had plenty from me that was free."

"Before we were married," I agreed. "Once you got a

ring on your finger I paid in blood."

She stood before me, her elbows on the counter, leaning forward, the uniform dipping open enough so that I could see how she was down there inside. Not that I didn't already know. When it had been good for us before with her moving naked around the trailer on hot days, almost everything right except the bills that she couldn't seem to stop running up, I had known every inch and all of the passion of her. Now I knew nothing, other than that we were divorced and the boy was dead.

"It's funny how it happened," she said thoughtfully. "Only it wasn't really funny. It was rotten and I just stood there in the street."

"Stood in the street? For what? He get hit by a car?"

"No, of course not. He was too small to be out there. Who puts a baby in the street?"

"So?" I sipped my coffee; it was hot.

"You know the apartment I had."

"Yeah. A dump. You hadn't cleaned it in a week before I got home. Beer cans on the shelf in the kitchen. Even some of your underthings in back of the davenport."

"A lot you cared. You took a plane and went out of the country."

I pushed the cup aside.

"I cared a whole lot. You think I was on a vacation? I want to know about the kid."

She looked out at the street. Nobody was moving in the rain. The rain hammered upon the tin roof, spilled over the side and splashed against the windows.

"I had to go to work after he was born."

"Naturally."

"The name you gave him was nice and so was the money you sent for him. But nobody could get along on fifteen dollars a week, could they?"

"Not very well. Only the dead."

Her face turned white.

"Don't use that word. It was only last week that it happened."

"All right."

"I got a job in a restaurant and I gave this woman who took care of the baby the salary they paid me. The tips were mine. They added up and I managed." She paused. "Remember the fire escape?"

"Four floors up," I replied.

"And four floors down."

"I see." I thought I did.

"The woman used to put the boy out there because it was cooler for him. I didn't like it at first but she did it anyway and after a while it seemed all right. Then—that day—I was coming home and I looked up to see if his basket was up there. I saw the basket and I saw—him. The woman was inside and she didn't know. I stood across the street, screaming, but I couldn't move. I couldn't move until he rolled off the fire escape and I ran in front of a car to try and catch him. I didn't get there in time. When I picked him up he was no longer living." Her eyes searched my face. "Bert, it was awful. It was worse than getting pregnant, worse than anything I've ever known."

Usually you can think of something to say to a person who has known disaster but in a case like that what can you do?

"I'd better meet the bus," I said, uncomfortably. "If I miss that there's no use going back to the farm."

She reached out and touched my arm with her hand.

"Bert," she said. "Bert, it's the same as always between us. It was, even with the other thing. I did wrong and we both paid for it."

I got up from the stool.

"It isn't the same, Emily. That was wiped out in court."

Her eyes pleaded with me.

"Bert, I followed you. I followed you with the last nickel that I had. But I wouldn't have called you until I had a job. I wouldn't have done that. I've caused you enough misery."

I took my arm away from her hand, which had found me again.

"There's nothing here," I said. "Nothing that you want."

Again she looked out at the rain.

"Maybe I want you, Bert."

"I said it was wiped out in court."

She came around the counter and she looked a little fuller in the stomach. For all I knew she was in trouble for the second time but I didn't quite believe that. Lots of girls keep some of the weight they've put on after a baby is born.

"I've got a room, Bert."

That was no big news to me.

"You'd have to have one or find some man who did."

She tried not to show it but I could see that I had hurt her.

"I don't like it in this town," she said. "Maybe it's all right but it's too small. Look at the business in this place. How am I going to make any tips?"

"Nobody's asking you to stay."

That hurt her, too.

"We could go on, Bert. We could find something to do. You could go back into construction and I'll work. There wouldn't have to be any marriage if you didn't want one. I wouldn't insist on that even if—well, even if there was another one. And I'd want another one. A woman misses a kid. She may not be pleased with it when she has it but the natural love is there and you can't fight it. I—Bert!"

"I'll see you around," I said and walked to the door. "That bus isn't going to be any later just because I'm shooting off my mouth."

She caught me at the door.

"I'm at the same house where you stayed the first night you were in town. The woman remembers you. She said you stood her up for the money the next morning but that you sent it out after you got your pay."

"Things were tough and she was regular."

I stepped out into the rain and she came right along with me.

"Bert, I won't lock my door."

"Suit yourself."

"Maybe you'll need a woman some night and I'll be there. I want your love but if I can't have that I'll take anything else you want to give me."

She stood there in the rain while I walked to the car. The rain was letting up some but if she stayed out there she'd get wet. That was none of my business.

I drove toward the bus station and I felt bad about the kid. I really did. A kid who had had such a bad start in life should have had a better ending. Falling off a fire escape, that was some lousy way to die. I don't know why I did but I think I cried just a little bit, seeing the kid's body and smashed on the pavement.

The bus wasn't in yet and I got a coke from a machine. It seemed to me that the best thing to do was to quit the farm and move on. I wouldn't be losing anything as far as money was concerned and Emily wouldn't be able to locate me. There would be no more weekly payments to send out, no way for her to know where I was. And what she had said about me going back into construction made sense. I'd always made big wages at that and the only reason I'd taken these stinking jobs that paid next to nothing was because I had been so utterly disgusted. You get that way, sore at the world, and you don't do what you should. Collins could paint his own house and barn—the barn was to come next—or he could burn them down. I was nearly finished with the house anyway and the barn was big, the siding dried out. It just wasn't worth it for what he paid.

The bus pulled in, I put the bottle away and walked out to it. Only a few drops of rain were falling and the sky was beginning to clear. I didn't know what I'd have to do for the rest of the day or whether or not I'd do it if Collins told me. Most likely he wouldn't say anything. If he hadn't slept with this woman he'd probably hit the mattress with her and I wouldn't see him until morning.

The door of the bus opened and the driver came out. Black hair, he had said. Black hair and that was all. Didn't she have anything else?

I got the answer to that very quickly.

She had almost everything I had ever seen before—and then some.

She stood there by the side of the bus, her eyes searching me out and lingering for a second, then, without smiling, turned to the bus driver.

"I don't know," she said. "My husband was supposed to meet me."

"Well, you can wait inside. I'll get your luggage out."

She was young, not much more than twenty, and her black dress matched her hair. The dress was tight over her hips and thighs, hugged snugly against her middle and strained as it fought to enclose the tilted, swollen mounds of her breasts. That Lucy Martin was large in the chest but the girl by the bus was larger. If she wasn't forty-two I didn't know how to measure with my eyes.

Forty-two and every bit of what she had belonged to Flint Collins.

"You must be Mrs. Collins," I said as I stepped forward.

She looked up at me, her red lips full and lush, her eyes questioning. She had a beautiful face, an expressive face, the kind of a face that could have gone to Hollywood and made good. Instead of that she was dragging all of those curves and loveliness onto a farm.

"Yes, I'm Mrs. Collins," she said. "Sharon Collins."

"Then I'm supposed to drive you to the house."

She smiled. Her teeth were white and even.

"You seemed shocked."

"I expected somebody older."

She nodded slowly.

"I was afraid of that. The age difference, I mean."

She didn't have too many things but she helped me carry them to the car. I put the bags in the back and when I moved back to close the gate my elbow hit her where she was full and round. I glanced at her after I slammed the gate into position. She wasn't offended by what I had done.

"I don't know your name," she said. "You must have a name."

"Bert. Bert Forbes."

"They build them big around here, don't they?"

"I don't know what they build around here but this isn't my home."

"Where was that?"

"All over."

She walked to the front of the car and I held the door for her. The dress rode up on her legs as she got in and I had never seen better looking nylons. I guess I didn't close the door right away, not until after she had pulled the hem of the dress down.

"Do you always do that?" she asked.

"Always do what?"

"Stare."

I didn't answer her and I felt funny and I got in behind the wheel. My face burned and for two blocks I didn't pay any attention to her. Right from the moment I had seen her by the side of the bus I had known what I wanted from her.

"I guess you think it's strange," she said.

"Lots of things are strange."

"Like a young girl marrying an older man?"

"Or the other way around," I said. "That's between you two. Who am I to say?"

She lit a cigarette.

"Do you like it on the farm?"

"Its all right."

"Flint said the men live over the garage. What other men?"

"Two do but I don't. There wasn't enough room and I'm in the main house."

"Lucky you."

"Well, it won't be for long. I'm only a painter and I don't have much to do with the farming end."

I took the highway out of town and I was terribly aware of her beside me. I still didn't look at her. I knew if I did I'd go after something that could get me into trouble.

We approached a bar, the last one before that place near the farm.

"I could use a drink," she said.

"I don't dare stop."

"Why not?"

"Because your husband would lay me open with a shotgun."

She laughed, low and soft.

"What he doesn't know wouldn't hurt him."

I drove past the bar, saying nothing.

Since I had seen her I knew what I had to do.

I had to get out of there.

CHAPTER THREE

The weather was clear the next morning and Collins didn't show up at the barn for milking. I was sorry about that. I hadn't seen him the previous afternoon or at supper and I wanted to collect my pay.

"That dame must have killed him in bed," Clem Foster

said as we were finishing up. He laughed. "But she don't have to be lonely. After one look at her I'd be willing to die the same way. Twice, if I could."

Art Weber kicked a pail out of the way.

"She's going to make it bad around here," he declared. "I can tell."

"Why?" I inquired.

"It follows, doesn't it? What's he got that a young girl would want?"

Foster snickered.

"They tell me some of the old guys are pretty good. If you ask me he'd have to be good to take care of her."

We walked up to the house for breakfast and Collins wasn't around yet.

"What's the matter?" Foster wanted to know from Norma who was working at the stove. "Your old man busy trying to plant a seed for a new crop? Maybe you'll have a relative in nine months, huh?"

I thought she was going to hit him with the frying pan.

"Sit down and eat," she said. "And keep your dirty mouth shut—if you can."

"That's a young man's work," he insisted.

"Shut up."

We ate but it wasn't as good as usual. Norma had burned the eggs and the bacon and the coffee was so strong it could have stood alone outside of the cup. Weber was worried about one of his kids and he wanted to get home for a couple of days but he didn't see how he could arrange it.

"You can't make connections," he said. "It takes eighteen hours to get there when it should take five. Maybe I should get a job closer to home."

"You aren't kidding me," Foster said. "You're just anxious to get into the sack with your wife. Why bother going that far? I'll fix you up with a girl who was born on the flat of her back and never got off it."

Weber didn't finish his coffee.

"Don't you ever think of anything else?"

"Only about who is going to be next."

They left for the fields before eight and I went out to sit on the back steps. I should have gone to work but I didn't. The house was still damp from the rain but I had a lot of rubbing to do with a wire brush, getting off

the loose paint, and by the time I was done with that the wood would be dry enough for me to put on the first coat.

Norma came out with the garbage, dropped the bag over the railing into an open can and regarded me silently for a moment.

"He won't like it if he finds you doing nothing," she said.

"I'm quitting."

She thought about that.

"I'm sorry, Bert. You aren't like the others." She bit down on her lower lip. "Bert, why did he do it?"

"Do what?"

"Marry a girl who's only twenty-two. Gee, I'm nineteen myself."

"Ask him."

"I did."

"And what did he say?"

"That it was no concern of mine."

"Well, maybe it isn't."

She returned to the kitchen and I sat there staring out across the fields. I didn't know where I was going or how I would get there but that didn't seem to be too important. That morning I had seen some of her things in the bathroom and I'd heard them once during the night. Perhaps I had been jealous of him because he had been having it so wonderful and I'd been in bed alone. When I'd gone back to sleep I'd dreamed of the blonde's body down by the stream, or a body like hers. Later I had realized that the nude woman had been Sharon Collins, even more full and alive than the blonde. I'd gotten up, feeling miserable.

I don't know how long I sat there but Collins came out after a while. He looked like hell.

"Get your rear moving up one of those ladders," he said. "You can't paint anything here on the porch."

I stood up.

"Pay me off," I said. "I'm pulling out of this deal and you can get another painter."

He acted as though Norma had already told him of my intentions.

"Try and get your money, Forbes."

I felt my jaw tighten.

"I've got it coming."

"Yes, and you agreed to do a job for me."

"What of it? I changed my mind."

"Nobody changes their mind with me."

"Here's one guy who did."

He spit within a couple of inches of my right foot. I felt rage taking hold of me.

"To hell with you, Forbes. If you want your money then do your work."

Collins was big but I could have taken him in a hurry. However, it wouldn't have proved anything and plastering him against the wall would serve no other purpose than to land me in jail. He was known locally and I wasn't. That made a difference. Of course I could have gone without my pay but it would have been rugged. I'd wait until he paid the following week—he paid every two weeks—and that would be the last he'd see of me.

"Okay," I said. "You win."

"I always win."

"That covers a lot of territory."

He spit again but this time over the railing.

"You work like hell on that ladder," he said. "Make believe you're getting rich."

"Yeah."

He followed me down the steps.

"Another thing, Forbes. There's a man bringing a cow over for the bull about one and you take care of that. The other men have to stay onto that clover and I'll be in town on business." He gave me one of his rare smiles. "Once a man marries he has to put his business in order."

"I've never handled the bull," I told him. "I made it clear when I hired out that I was no farmer."

"You just take him from his stall to the breeding area."

"That's great. So he kills me on the way."

His face colored red.

"Don't you argue with me," he shouted. "You hook the staff onto the ring in his nose. Once he's in the breeding area you can remove the staff. And you take him back inside the same way. Once he's had the cow he's like a lamb."

"He'd better be."

I got my tools, stripped to the waist and climbed the highest ladder that he owned. The ladder was old but it

was solid. I'd proved that by putting it out flat on the ground and jumping upon the rungs. Collins had cursed me for that but with a hundred and ninety pounds I wasn't taking any chances.

Collins was alone when he drove out and I worked in the sun, sweat gathering on my skin and the chips of paint that I rubbed off sticking to the sweat. Maybe I could have gotten off more of the old stuff but I was burning about Collins and I didn't care what I did. Most painters would have earned more in two days than I drew for a whole week. Still, it was my own fault. I'd asked for the job and he'd given it to me.

About an hour later Norma came out of the house and shouted up to me that some girl was calling me from town. I told her to say that I couldn't be reached. That would be Emily and anything we had to discuss with each other had been discussed before.

At twelve I knocked off for the morning but I didn't go in to eat. I stretched out in the shade of one of the trees and let the sweat dry in the gentle breeze. I closed my eyes and I guess I slept for a while.

"Some way to make a living," a pleasant voice said to me, waking me up. "There's nothing like the farm, is there?"

I opened my eyes. Sharon Collins was standing over me, looking down, her smile fresh and bright. I hardly noticed the smile. All I noticed was her naked flesh between shorts and halter, the side swells of her breasts that the halter failed to conceal.

"Retirement in the country," I said and got to my feet. "Just the birds and the bees and not a worry in the world."

"You were going to quit, weren't you?"

"I gave the idea a whirl."

"So now you can finish your painting?"

"If the bull doesn't do away with me first."

She smiled.

"What's the bull got to do with it?" she asked.

"Nothing, only somebody is bringing a cow over and I've never been closer than ten feet to him before." The pieces of dried paint itched my chest and I wiped them off with my hand. "I wish they would bring that cow," I said. "Your husband will yell if I don't do something

on the house."

"You missed your lunch," she said. "Norma waited for you and then she put the stuff away."

I could hear a truck coming up the road but it was behind some trees and I couldn't see it.

"Norma's a nice girl," I told her. "I should have said that I wouldn't be in but she ought to be getting used to me by this time. When it's hot I only like to eat in the morning and maybe a little at night."

The truck turned in at the lane. It was an old truck, covered with mud. I didn't know the man who was driving it.

"Norma may be a nice girl but she isn't very friendly," Sharon decided. "You'd think I had a disease or something. I talk to her and it's just as though she didn't know what I said."

The man stopped the truck and I walked over to it. He had a cow in back and I directed him to drive around to the rear of the barn. He nodded.

"I've been here before, fellow, and I haven't got all day. Let's give the cow what she wants."

I left the truck and started for the barn. Sharon caught up with me.

"This isn't anything for you to see," I said.

"Maybe I want to."

"It's still no place for you."

"I'll do what I want. It's my husband's farm, isn't it?"

I didn't fight with her. She was right about that and I was just a hired man. And some women like those things. I don't know why.

We walked through the barn to the other end. It was a big barn and clean. Water trickled into the individual drinking cups. At one spot the passage was narrow, due to a big box that held feed, and we came together, hard. Her soft hand caught my bare arm, keeping her from going down, and I almost grabbed her then. The cow was already in the breeding pen and the bull knew it. He was pawing the floor and snorting. I didn't know which one of us was the more anxious, the bull or me.

"Excuse me," she said.

"Forget it."

After we reached the section set off for the bull I found the staff hanging on a nail. The bull was a huge beast,

his head up over the door, and Weber had said that he was a little more than four years old. We had been talking about it one night and Weber had added that a bull usually became dangerous at that age. Of course, his horns had been removed but he had enough power in his hoofs and head to kill a man. A lot of farmers would have done away with him, bringing up a younger animal, but he was good stock and Collins wasn't throwing his money away like that.

"Gee, he scares me," Sharon said.

"That makes two of us."

"Look at those eyes. Wild."

"Yeah."

I found the ring in his nose and both the ring and his nose were wet. In a second I had hooked on the staff and he tried to raise his head in protest. I jerked his head down and unfastened the door. He knew what the staff meant but he couldn't do anything when it was fastened onto him.

"Stand back," I told her. "Sometimes he tries to go in a circle."

She moved away but he came out all right, about two thousand pounds of power that could, without the staff, become utter destruction.

"Flint says he sometimes comes down here at night to look at this animal," she said. "Why?"

"You've got me. I guess he's proud of him. He's won some ribbons and he's got papers. That's why the farmers bring their cows over here."

I got the bull almost to the exit, the one that led out to the pen, before he stopped, stubborn, and bellowed. The bellow must have scared Sharon because she screamed. I pulled on the staff and he cut out the noise.

There was nothing getting him outside into the pen. Once the door was open he stood calmly, waiting for me to remove the staff. I did and he walked past me.

Sharon and I stood in the doorway and watched. The cow wasn't a big one, probably a couple of years old, and at first she was afraid. The pen wasn't large and she couldn't run far. The farmer sat on the fence to make sure that he wasn't paying for nothing. I wouldn't have sat there. The bull, had he been so inclined, could have knocked it down with one rush.

"Just like a man," Sharon said.

"What?"

"The way that bull is chasing her. Isn't that what men do?"

"Sometimes."

The bull finally caught the cow in one corner and it didn't take long. Her back arched and she let out a long blat. I could hear the girl beside me breathing heavily as she saw sex in its rawest form, a sex that was completely without love.

"Poor thing," Sharon said as the cow fell forward, kicking, and landed upon the ground. I saw that she wasn't looking now. "Poor, miserable thing."

"You asked for it," I reminded her.

"Yes, and I'm sorry I did. Or maybe I'm not sorry. Maybe it makes people seem better."

The bull was very quiet, the cow back on her feet, and I had to walk out there to get him. I didn't like that for a second. I assured myself that he ought to be calm but with an animal that size you can never be sure. However, he behaved and I hooked the staff onto the ring in his nose.

"Charge it to me," the man said from the fence.

I walked over to him, leading the bull.

"Cash," I informed him.

He looked sore.

"Guess you don't trust me."

"It isn't that. I only work here."

"To hell with you." He reached into his pocket. "How much?"

"You've been here before, haven't you?" I didn't know what Collins charged.

"Then it's twenty. It's worth that much just to walk the cow off and onto the truck."

I put the bill in my pocket and walked inside with the bull. After a couple of minutes rest he didn't want to go but the staff convinced him. I was glad when he was locked up. He began pawing the floor with his front feet and stomping with his rear ones.

"You could show me around," Sharon said as I hung the staff on the nail.

"A lot of painting I'll get done that way."

"You could say that it took longer."

“Well—”

She wanted to see where the hay was kept and I took her upstairs. The haymow wasn't like the old ones you used to read about. None of the hay was loose. It was all baled, the bales piled high, and Collins could get more of it into the barn that way.

“Smells nice in here,” she said.

“Yes, but the grass smells better when it's just been cut.”

She sat down on a bale that had either fallen down or hadn't been put up. Those shorts rode into her thighs like she was going to split the seams. I didn't dare look at her above the shorts. It had been a long time for me between women and I had to remember who she was.

“We could have a cigarette,” she said. “If you brought any.”

“Not up here. It's too dangerous.”

“What isn't dangerous?”

“Me being up here with you is another one.”

She laughed.

“Are you that afraid of me?”

I glanced away from her legs, the heat of the afternoon slamming into me. The night before her legs and her body had yielded to Collins, her legs strong and demanding and her body a pulsing flame. I shook my head. Thinking of that made it all the worse.

“I've got to get back to the house,” I said thickly. “If there's anything else you want to see in the barn you can find it easily enough.”

“Why don't you sit down?”

“No.”

“Why? Do you dislike me that much?”

I turned and walked away from her. She didn't know one third of it, of how I felt.

“So long,” she called after me.

I kept on walking.

Back at the house I got out the paint and went to work. It was hot in the sun and of course I had to move the ladder every few feet. I slapped the paint on, not particular how it went, because it was only the first coat. The bees started coming around—there was a nest of them somewhere close—and I got stung once. I killed the thing and rubbed the sting.

A tractor roared far down in one of the fields and I knew they'd be coming in with a load. The bales would be lifted into the barn with a hoist but after that, once inside, it was brute strength. Collins could have made the work easier but I guess he thought men were cheaper than equipment.

Collins returned about four-thirty and I was up on the ladder. He came directly over from the car to stand below me.

"You haven't done much," he said.

"Say, this isn't easy."

"You've been resting."

He was never satisfied.

"Look," I said. "There was that business about the bull. I can't be two places at once."

"Oh, the bull. How'd you make out?"

"Fine."

"I hope you collected."

"Yeah. Twenty bucks."

You'd have thought I'd dropped a bucket of paint on his head. He began to shout and curse. Even when I dropped the bill to the ground it didn't make him happy. He stuffed the bill into his pocket.

"You should have gotten twenty-five. People hear about that and they'll think I'm cutting prices." He cursed again. "What have you got between your ears, Forbes? An empty space?"

"How was I to know? The man said it was twenty."

"Cheap slob," Collins stormed. "And you're stupid. I ought to jerk this ladder right out from under you. Maybe if you landed on your head you'd get some brains."

I looked down. It was quite a distance and he was just crazy enough to do it. But he didn't. He rounded the house, the oaths trailing out behind him.

I resumed painting but I didn't feel like it. I hated his guts. He hadn't said so but I knew that when I got paid he'd take out the five. He never lost anything, or he said he didn't. Maybe he was in for a surprise. That wife of his gave the promise of being easy and I was only human.

The brush dropped out of my hand but I didn't rush down to pick it up.

I stood there on the ladder thinking about his wife.

The thoughts were pleasant.

PLEASURE GROUND

CHAPTER FOUR

We worked through until Saturday and when we were at meals you could feel the tense atmosphere in the house. Norma hardly ever spoke to Sharon and when Sharon came in wearing shorts and a halter Collins hollered at her to get into something decent. She didn't protest and after that she stuck to dresses but the dresses were tight and her figure rolled under them.

Except for one night I stayed in my room and that one night I went over to talk to Weber.

"I need a loan," he said to me.

"You know better than to ask me for one."

"Sure, but I asked Collins. He turned me down flat. He said that I got paid and that anything that came up at home was my problem."

That was Collins for you. Not heart, just drive.

On Friday night he took Sharon to some dance and he was yelling at her when they came in. I could tell that he was drunk but he sometimes got that way. For a big man he couldn't drink much. After four or five shots he became a living corpse. During my first week at the farm I'd found him sleeping on the porch. I had put him to bed but I hadn't known him very well then. Now that I knew him he could be drowning and I'd walk the other way.

Saturday afternoon Sharon came to one of the windows where I was working. Collins was down in the fields at the time, putting the prong to the men to get them to double their efforts. Most Sundays they only did the milking and the other chores but if he flipped his buttons he'd send them out to work just like any day.

"You've been avoiding me," she said. "Haven't you?"

I wiped the paint from my hands.

"I've been busy." I hadn't been avoiding her. She just hadn't been around. "The more I do the more he wants done."

She ran a comb through her hair.

"I didn't think he was that way, Bert."

"Well, he is."

"I wouldn't work for him."

I worked some more paint into the wood.

"You're worse off than I am," I said. "This is only a job for me but you're married to the guy."

"Didn't you hear him last night?"

"I guess I did."

"All because I danced with some man. What was the harm in that? He doesn't dance, or if he tries he can't." She sighed. "This place stinks. I'll go nuts in six months." She thought about that. "No, give me three months."

I couldn't see her very well because of the screen. I mean, I couldn't see how she swelled out under the dress.

"I guess that does it," I said and quit for the day.

"What do you do on Saturday night?"

Her perfume filled my nose, the rich scent of a woman.

"Tonight I'm going out."

"Other Saturday nights, I mean. And the rest of the nights?"

"Nothing."

"Just like me almost."

"You've got plenty to do," I said.

She laughed.

"I'm talking about things besides that."

I went down the ladder and put my stuff away. Generally I would have put the brush in turpentine but Collins hadn't bought it, saving a few cents, and I had to use water.

My room was hot when I entered it and I stripped down, then put on a robe and walked down the hall to the bath. I closed the door and I could smell her perfume again. A pair of stockings hung from the shower rod curtain and I put these on a small table. Just touching them made me want to have her in them and to have one of my hands go all the way to the top. I grunted and stepped into the shower. She was in my blood and something was going to happen because of it. The bomb inside of me had a short fuse and it was already burning for her. All I needed was the opportunity.

There was a fight at supper that night. Collins was in a nasty mood and he said none of us were doing our jobs the way we should. Sharon just looked at him and said

nothing as he swore. I wondered as I finished my ice tea how she had ever gotten in with him or why she had gone as far as marriage.

"You could go to the Town Hall dance with us tonight," he said to me when his temper had slowed down. He knew better than to ask the other two men. Foster would run from bar to bar and Weber just sat in his room and felt sorry for himself.

"I've got other plans," I told him. "Thanks anyway."

"You seeing your former wife?" He had heard about her.

"Not a chance."

"Stay sober."

"Sure."

"And you work tomorrow."

"Hell, tomorrow is Sunday."

That color began to creep up into his face.

"Forbes, I don't care what day it is. You work for me."

The others had to work, too, but they didn't say anything. He wouldn't get a great deal out of them. He was just trying to show us that he was the boss. It was pointless. We knew that already.

I had left my wallet upstairs and I went up there to get it. Sharon must have followed me right away because she was waiting in the hall when I came out of the room.

"I was sort of counting on you," she said. "He'd let me dance with one of his men. And I'll be new at the hall."

"Some other time."

"When?"

"I don't know."

I got out of the house a few minutes later. I wanted to be with her but that dance hall didn't fit in with my plans. Besides, I couldn't let the blonde down. She was too nice a girl for that. Not that Sharon Collins wasn't a nice girl. As far as I knew she was. I couldn't understand why she had married such a tough guy, a man so much older, but she must have had her own reasons for that. And he hadn't started working her hard, the way he made his daughter work. She got up when she felt like it and she didn't do anything that I could see. Maybe he had killed his first wife with work, as they said, but this girl was a toy to him and he wasn't going to spoil it. As for her

past I didn't know anything about that. Nobody did. He'd simply gone on that trip and she'd caught him. I didn't think she had caught very much but then I wasn't his wife and I didn't know what was between them.

The lane out to the township road was in poor condition and it needed several loads of shale on it. One rainy day when we hadn't been able to work Collins had said we could go with the truck and bring in some but after he'd phoned the man who owned the pit and the man had said it would be fifty cents a load he'd changed his mind. He'd sent us out with rakes and we'd pawed around in the mud and rain. For a man who had bought a young wife, a woman who'd have to have things, you'd have thought the shale was cheap. Only to Collins it wasn't. He'd been bad all that day because of the man wanting to charge him.

The township road was hardly better than the lane. I don't know why it is but township roads are usually a mess. Once you get up to the county level, such as the highway into town, the roads usually improve. I couldn't give you the answer to that. Maybe the state doesn't give much aid to the townships so they scrape the dirt with a road machine, dig up the stones and think they've done swell.

Trees lined the road and I walked through the shade of them. A few were nut trees and some gray squirrels were already looking over the fall crop. During my second week at the farm I'd tried to tame one of them, more to have something to do than anything else, but Collins had told me to cut it out. I hadn't seen any sense to this, about Collins getting angry simply because I'd been amusing myself, but I hadn't done the same thing again.

When I got to the beginning of the Martin farm I knew it. The fields hadn't been mowed in a couple of years and sweet fern bushes were beginning to appear in them. I didn't know much about farming but I did know that those bushes spread rather rapidly and that they could choke out the grass in a pasture or a field. It sometimes takes years to realize a good hay crop but only a few for the land to go to pot.

I was surprised to find Lucy waiting for me at the little road that led to her house. She didn't have the car, just stood there as though she was trying to make up her mind

what to do. She wore a red dress with short sleeves and it fit close over her body. She was very pretty, her long blonde hair almost reaching down to the top of the dress and her lips red and matching the color of the material.

"I guess we walk after all," she said when I reached her.

"That's all right with me if it is with you."

"It'll have to be. Something's wrong with the car."

"Such as what?"

"I don't know but I had hardly any lights coming home last night. They'd get bright when I raced the motor but after I stopped doing that they became dim."

I took her arm and we started down the road.

"That would be the battery," I said. "Either that or the generator isn't working."

"A lot I know about those things."

I tried to explain it to her but I knew I wasn't getting through. Most of the time you don't with a girl. They can tell you what's wrong with their washing machine when it breaks down but when it comes to cars most of the time they don't know right from left.

"Maybe I can push it to get it started," I said, giving up on the technical part. "There's this little hill and the motor might catch. That way you could drive into town and not get a big bill for somebody coming out here."

"That's an idea. I hadn't thought of that. And there's a little pitch from the house to the road. A shove ought to do it."

We walked on and we didn't say much. For some reason she reminded me of my first girl but I couldn't understand why she did. The first girl had brown hair and while she had been pretty enough she hadn't had the looks of the blonde. That had been in the foster home where I'd gotten into trouble, the trouble making it almost impossible for the county agency to place me anywhere else. I didn't think that it had been my fault. I'd been sixteen, going to school and helping out around the house afterward, and although the boys I knew in school had run with girls I hadn't had the money for that. The county had paid so much for my room and board and they'd bought clothes for me when they thought about it. I'd been sixteen, growing fast, and none of the clothes had fit for very long. But I hadn't complained or been bitter. I'd been a bastard, my parents unmarried, and

just knowing that had hurt. Because of my size some of the girls had been interested in me but I'd stayed away from them. I'd stayed away from them until Bonnie and I hadn't been able to help that. She'd been eighteen, two years my senior, and she'd come to the house for a visit over one holiday. Her room had been next to mine on the second floor and the woman of the house had been busy running all over almost every afternoon. Once Bonnie had met me in the hall, dared me to kiss her, and not wanting her to get sore or anything I'd kissed her. I hadn't been very good at it but I'd learned fast and when she'd put my hand to the front of her blouse I'd been anxious to keep right on kissing her. This had gone on for a couple of days, just kissing and holding each other tight, her tiny body mashed against mine. Then one afternoon we'd thought the woman was out of the house and she'd led me into her bedroom. She hadn't even bothered with the door, leaving it open, and she'd slid out of her things. I'd never seen a naked girl before, just pictures of them, and when she'd come into my arms, telling me there was more that I hadn't known, I'd gone a little nuts and shoved her down onto the bed. We'd been on the bed, straining for the final moment, when the woman appeared in the doorway. She'd been furious of course and she'd sent the girl back home, called the welfare department and kicked me out. From then until the end of high school it had been rough, nobody trusting me and keeping the girls out of my way. I'd been glad to go back to work.

"Gee, you talk a lot," the blonde said.

"Sorry. I was thinking."

"About what?"

"Nothing important."

She tripped over a stone and I caught her. She sort of spun around and came up against me. The pressure of her body felt fine.

"I stop in the diner before I go to work," she said. "There's a new girl in there and we got to talking. She said she used to be married to you."

"She passes out too much information."

"But you're not married now."

"No. We've got no ties."

"She acts unhappy."

"I can't prevent that. She ruined the whole business."

We got to the highway and turned right, crossing the road so that we could walk on the left and face traffic.

"They tell me Mr. Collins has a very pretty wife," she said.

"She's too good for him."

"I wouldn't know about that but she must not think so." A truck passed us. "Right after my people were killed he came over to see me. We were friendly then and he said he would make it worth my time if I married him. I guess I laughed, thinking it funny, so he tried to buy the farm. When I wouldn't sell he called me all the foul words that he could think of. There was no excuse for it. If I want to keep the farm, why shouldn't I?"

"It's probably a burden but you've got the right."

Darkness was falling, fast as it does in the country, and I could see the lights in front of the bar up ahead. There were several cars out front.

"I'd like to have my cow mated with his bull," she went on. "That's the best bull in the county and I wouldn't mind caring for a calf. I've got papers on the cow, too."

"Why don't you ask him?"

"I did and he told me where I could go." She laughed. "I'm afraid I've disappointed him. I haven't gone there yet."

We found the place crowded but most of the people were at tables around the small dance floor and we took stools at the bar. The old man smiled when we ordered beer and he drew a couple of cold ones. Later, if he ran out, he wouldn't bother to tap another keg and we'd have to drink bottle stuff. At this time of the night he had his hearing aid turned on and he could hear as good as anybody. Once he had enough money in the till for a good night he'd shut off the hearing aid, shut off the service because he couldn't hear and everybody would drift away.

Most of the people in the bar were young. Usually the older members of a farm family don't go in for this sort of a thing but would rather go to a dance and drink soda pop or stay home. It's the younger element that wanders, farm girls and boys mixed in with the town kids who come out looking for kicks. Generally they don't stay too long in any one place and when you see a fellow buy a six

pack you know that he isn't going to take his girl onto one of the back roads for the sole purpose of looking at the stars.

"I don't come in here much," Lucy said. "It's hardly the thing for a girl to do when she's alone. Every man gets the wrong idea. So I have some beer home and let it go at that."

"Well, I can't afford it."

"Collins was always cheap pay."

"Yeah, it couldn't be worse unless you worked for nothing and boarded yourself."

She tasted her beer and I took a long swallow of mine.

"A man like you could do better," she said.

We drank beer and I told her about myself, more than I had told her or indicated before. I didn't mention Bonnie, just that the foster homes had come one after the other, and when I talked about it, including my marriage, it didn't sound like a pretty story. Even the marriage said that I had been running from something, most likely the insecurity of my past, and I couldn't help but recognize the fact that I was still running. She must have sensed it, too, but she didn't say so. She just said that I had done a fine thing for the boy and my wife and that I shouldn't have any regrets.

"It must have been love," she added.

"No, it was more sex than love."

"Don't they both go together?"

"Sure, but it wasn't that way with me. Or probably I had her and I didn't want to lose her. I'd never had anybody before. When I sat down on a stick of furniture in one of those homes it didn't belong to me and I didn't have any claim to it. I wanted something that was mine. And what did I get? I don't even know what she did with the furniture."

About ten I put some money in the juke box and we danced. She was a little stiff at first, not as she had been at the hall, especially during our second dance, but I kept pulling her in close to me and she stopped fighting. After that we were like one, going through number after number, and it was wonderful. Finally we hit a hot piece and she let herself go. When I spun her the dress flared out from the bottom, her body moving away from me for a moment, and her legs under the stockings started

the pulse of desire raging through my blood. She came back to me, her eyes almost closed, her lips parted, her body unafraid to become a part of mine. When the music stopped my mouth sought out her lips. The people around us didn't matter. For a second her lips stirred and then she pushed away from me.

"I've had enough," she said as we returned to our stools. "Don't forget that we're walking."

But we had two more before we left. I didn't leave any tip for the man behind the bar. Nobody ever did.

The road was dark and we walked with my one arm around her waist. My arm is long and the palm of my hand lay over the flat of her stomach. I suppose I could have kissed her on the way but I didn't. I talked some, mostly about nothing, just how it rained too much and I didn't like working for Collins. She didn't seem to be listening and the last half of a mile was covered in silence.

"You said something about pushing the car," she reminded me when we got to her road.

"Yes, but it wouldn't do any good at this time of the night. Maybe it would start but I doubt if it would last until you got to town. You'd need lights and that takes juice."

She sighed.

"So I'm stuck?"

"No. I can do it in the morning before I have to go to work."

"Work? On Sunday?"

"That's what Collins said. He wasn't fooling."

She leaned against me for a second.

"I hate to bother you."

"Aw, that's all right."

I felt that she wanted me to leave her but I just stood there and wondered if I should try for another kiss."

"You could come in for a beer," she said suddenly. "That is, if you aren't too tired."

She didn't have to ask me twice. I murmured my thanks and we walked through the blackness toward the house. The road was smooth and I could tell that she'd had new shale put on it. Collins couldn't afford shale, or wouldn't pay for it, but she could.

We entered the kitchen and after she turned on the

light I saw that it was nice and clean. Not fancy, but nice.

"I'm not much of a painter," she said and opened the refrigerator door.

The blue trim was neat and even.

"You did all right, Lucy."

"Well, it was something to do during the day but, starting next week, I'll have nights off. Somehow I never get much done when I'm off nights. I read, watch the television if there's a good program on and go to bed."

I carried the beer for us, two cans and two glasses, and she led me into the living room. That room was clean, too, but the furniture wasn't new. We sat on the davenport and I poured the beer.

I suppose I ought to be ashamed for that afternoon down by the creek," she said. "But I'm not. If it had been any other man, like that Clem Foster, I'd have died. With you—well, I don't know. I can't explain it. I meet you once and the next time you see me, all of me. I was mad at first but I got over it."

I looked at the full curves under her dress. Probably she had gotten over it but I hadn't. I wanted her nude again, nude right there in that room, nude and completely unafraid. Yet I made no effort to get closer to her. You didn't treat a nice girl that way. You found somebody who didn't care—or a wife like Sharon Collins where you sought both pleasure and revenge. Of course you'd get your pleasure but seldom the revenge. You only hurt an innocent person and solved nothing.

"The house is terribly hot," she said. "I told my father it would make a difference when he cut down the shade trees but he claimed the trees were getting old and he was afraid they'd fall on the roof."

It was hot but I hadn't noticed the heat until she mentioned it.

"Red is a warm color," I said, meaning her dress.

"But I like red."

"So do I."

"Unless its blood."

"Funny for a nurse to say that."

"Yes, I guess it is."

The beer went in a hurry and I didn't ask her about getting more. I just went out into the kitchen and opened

a couple of cans. She smiled as I came back into the living room and poured for us. This time when I sat down I was within inches of her. She looked a question at me but I said nothing. Nice girl or not I was a man with all the urges of a man. I couldn't change that.

She protested a little as I leaned over to kiss her but it was simply the natural protest of a decent girl and it didn't mean anything. I felt some of the beer spill out of the glass onto my trousers as I found her lips. Her eyes were wide open, very blue in the soft light, and the question was still there. Then finally her eyes closed and her lips moved as they had back at the bar. But, of course, there was nothing to stop us this time, nobody to see, just the two of us in a big house. Presently as her mouth began to open, I broke off the kiss and took the glass from her hand, putting both of them on the floor out of the way. I expected her to say something but she didn't and her lips were waiting for my mouth. The only sound was a sigh that came from deep inside of her and her hands came up to my head, her fingers digging at my hair. Slowly I began pushing her down flat on the davenport and this time her eyes did come open.

"What are we doing?" she asked, breathing hard.

"The most natural thing in the world."

"And—wrong."

"Even if we mean it?" I crushed her mouth with a kiss.

"Bert, Ive—"

"It's all right." I had to have her. "It has to be all right. And we're human. What can you expect?"

"Bert—"

"Please, Lucy."

The dress had a zipper in back and I found it, pulling it down. The air rushed in and out of her lungs and I felt her tremble as the tips of my fingers touched her bare skin. I kissed her again, moving my one hand up to the snap I had to find.

"No," she whispered desperately. "No, Bert."

But I had already released the snap and I wasn't to be denied. I pulled the dress down from her shoulders, pushed the bra aside and sought her out with my hand. She was full, just as I had remembered her from down by the stream, and then I felt her shoving against my

hand, wanting to be known as much as I wanted to know her.

"Don't tear the dress," she begged. She kissed me hard. "Here, let me do it."

She twisted away from me, falling to the floor, but she got to her feet right away. For a second I thought she would run but she had gone too far for that.

"Just like the creek," she said as she got out of the dress. "Only better. And wrong. I know it's wrong." Her eyes washed over my face. "It's wrong but I need you so, Bert."

She dropped her things onto the floor and kicked them out of the way. As she came to me, naked and all woman, she upset one of the glasses of beer.

"Don't make me sorry," she said when she was in my arms. "Don't ever make me sorry."

I didn't make her sorry, only at the start. She cried out with pain but soon her kisses, frantic and wild, told me that the pain was gone, that only the female of her lived to rise to the heights of glorious passion. Minutes later she scaled the heights, clinging to me, her teeth buried deep in my shoulder.

I didn't get to work the next day.

But I did get the car started for her.

I felt like a tramp when I left.

It was the only time I had ever been first.

CHAPTER FIVE

Collins was furious at me for having missed Sunday and he kept hollering at me for the better part of two days, stopping under the ladder to curse and rave. He made me work nights after supper to catch up for what I could have done on Sunday but although it made me sore I felt better about having something to do. I knew that Lucy was at the hospital days, that she'd be home at night, but I felt too low to go over there. She was a clean girl and I had treated her unfairly. I was the only man she had given herself to but I had nothing to

offer her. I imagined that she would be hurt but I told myself that she would be better off without me. She had her roots in the farm and as soon as I drew my pay I was leaving. My future was too uncertain to share with a girl. And I wasn't sure that I wanted to share it. I'd tried that with Emily and it hadn't worked out. That was enough to scare me.

Wednesday was the day that we got paid and I packed the night before. Emily called the farm every day and although I didn't talk to her I was sick of it. She had nothing for me and I had nothing for her.

Collins was drinking more than he had been and he didn't get up in the morning to help with the milking. He made me do that, along with the painting, and since my hours on the ladder were long the whole affair was tiring. It wasn't the work so much as the heat that wore me down.

"I had some night," Clem Foster said out in the barn Wednesday morning.

"When don't you have a night for yourself?" I asked him.

He straightened up from washing a milk pail.

"Bert, this was something special. Sure some of these waitresses in the diner and the bars are pretty fast but the new one at the diner in town says yes before you even ask. She got off at eight and by eight-thirty I knew I'd been with a woman."

The cows had to be fed and I began doing that. Emily hadn't changed. She'd never change. She was man hungry and that's all there was to it. Of course we were divorced and I had no claim on her but still what Foster had said made me feel upset. I don't know why unless it's because you don't like to see somebody go all to hell.

There was an empty bottle alongside the pen where the bull was kept and since it hadn't been there the previous day I knew that Collins had been out there the night before. Just why he would want to come to the barn to see the bull when he had so much waiting for him in bed was a mystery to me. Probably he was proud of the fact that he owned such a fine animal and he had to look at the thing while he convinced himself there wasn't anything that he couldn't own.

Of course there was still the matter of trying to strike

back at him through his wife but I had just about given up on that idea. He was a stinker but why should I injure him? All I needed was my pay, which he handed out at noon, and after I got ten miles out of town I'd forget that he even existed. There was some construction going on upstate and I might be able to hire out. If not there were other jobs.

Collins and his wife were in the kitchen when we arrived for breakfast and he was yelling at his wife and daughter. I washed and sat down at the table. He was complaining about the house not being kept neat but I didn't see how Norma could do it. She had been helping out in the fields ever since Sunday and it was no work for a girl. She looked beat and she acted it.

"I'll do what I can," Sharon said.

He glanced at her.

"You'd better. What's a wife for anyway?"

He left for town before we had finished eating and nobody had anything to say. It was like being in a bar with some man who wanted to fight all the time. He just spoiled it for everybody.

We walked outside and while Foster went to get one of the tractors, Art Weber followed me around the house.

"I think I can talk to you," he said. "I've got to talk to somebody."

"Maybe I need somebody to talk to myself."

He leaned against the side of the building.

"I hate this job. It's killing me."

"There are other farms."

He nodded.

"Yes, and I thought about that, like getting nearer home. Now I can't."

"Nobody's got a chain around your leg. Get your check and hit the road. That's what I'm going to do."

He watched me for a moment while I opened up a can of paint and stirred it so that the oil wouldn't all be on top.

"It was simple—until last night."

I looked up at him.

"One night should change things?" I wanted to know.

"That one did." His eyes were fastened on the far end of the field and they were wet. "I—well, I've been seeing Norma."

I stood up.

"I wouldn't have believed that," I said.

He shrugged.

"A man gets lonesome out here," he declared. "I'm beginning to think Clem knows the answer. He goes from one woman to another and it isn't serious. But, like I say, I was lonesome and so was Norma."

"I see."

"It only happened a few times, like when her old man was out and she could get away from the house." He was thoughtful, his eyes wetter than they had been before. "But it happened once too often, Bert. She came over to my room last night and she was crying. Collins was out in the barn looking at the bull and she could only stay long enough to tell me that—oh, hell, she's pregnant."

I didn't know what to say. What could I say? He was a good man and the whole thing was unfortunate. Maybe you could blame him or the girl but that wouldn't solve the problem.

"You understand what I said, Bert?"

"Yes, I understood."

"I'm married and she's pregnant."

"That's bad."

"So I can't leave."

"A lot of men would."

"Possibly, but I can't. Collins is pushing her in the fields and that can do a lot of damage. If I ran I'd hate myself."

"What's her attitude?"

"She's frightened."

"Naturally."

"And she's a fine girl. She doesn't talk much but it's only because she hates this whole thing. Getting that way has made it worse for her."

He turned suddenly and walked away from me. I climbed the ladder. And I thought I had troubles. They were nothing like his. That kind of a mess you don't get out of in five minutes. It takes forever and forever is a long time.

I could have finished the house that morning but I didn't. All I had to do was collect my pay and cart my stuff into town. I failed to see anything but tragedy on this farm and I wanted to get away from it. Perhaps I

would be able to forget all about Lucy Martin but I doubted it. We hadn't started her car until late Sunday afternoon and the hours had been wild before that. Even after I had pushed the car we had belonged to each other while the engine turned over, the car parked by the side of the road.

"Never make me sorry," she had said again.

"I won't."

"I didn't know anything could be like this."

"Later on it gets better."

"And I'll be off nights."

"Yes."

"Collins doesn't have to know. If I can mortgage the farm we could try it. We'll work together and get what we want out of life."

I felt lower than the foot of the ladder resting on the ground. You rip a good girl's heart out and it leaves a bad taste in your mouth. Like with Art Weber. He had to live with what he had done and I had to live with this.

At twelve Collins rolled in from town and I went inside the house to pick up my pay. I didn't even put the brush to soak or close up the can of paint I had been using. There was only a little more work to be done and he could do it himself.

Weber and Foster had come up from the fields for their checks but Foster said that Norma had been sick to her stomach and that she was resting under one of the trees.

"That don't stop her from working none," Collins said. "She's just got a lazy streak."

Weber made no remark but I could see the look of despair in his face. He couldn't tell Collins the truth and Norma couldn't get out of working.

"I'd like my check," I said to Collins. He held nothing in his hands and the check wasn't on top of the table. "Or have I become an orphan?"

He just stared at me.

"If you aren't going to eat get back to your painting. And you won't have to work tonight."

"I still want my check."

He turned away from me.

"Go ahead and want, Forbes."

I had never touched him before but I did this time. I

caught him by the shoulder and swung him around.

"Say, what the hell is this?" I demanded hotly.

He shook my hand loose, his face dark with anger.

"You were going to leave, weren't you?" he asked.

"That's my business."

"I looked in your room and your bags were packed."

"That's still my business."

He shook his head.

"No, it isn't. It's mine. I hired you to paint things up on the farm and that's what you'll have to do."

"I'm not the only painter in the county."

He laughed.

"You're the only one I can hire for forty a week."

"So I was dumb," I admitted. "I should have crawled out of town on my hands and knees." I snapped my fingers impatiently. "My check, Collins."

"Drop dead, Forbes. You get your pay when you're done. I'm satisfied with your work, more or less, and you're staying right here."

I felt my muscles bulge, the power crawling into them but I managed to retain my common sense, too. Pounding him through the wall wouldn't get me any check. He had some cheap help and he was going to make the most of it. Probably I could have gone to the authorities but that would take time and I didn't have the money to hold me over while I did that. Besides, he could say anything and what proof did I have?

"You're a stinker," I said meaning it. "I kicked a skunk once and he didn't smell as badly."

"Shut up. I know a bargain when I've got one."

"Yeah, and that's a fact."

He measured me with his eyes.

"Get outside and finish the house," he said.

I looked at the food on the table. I didn't want any.

"We'll need paint for the barn," I reminded him.

I thought he was going into a rage and he almost did. He cursed for a couple of minutes before he became civil.

"You should have told me before I went into town, Forbes. You think I want to spend the rest of my life driving up and down that stupid road?"

I glanced away from him and at his wife. She didn't look happy.

"You knew about it," I said. "I can't paint without

paint. You ought to realize that on your own."

He unbuttoned his shirt and thought about it.

"I'll buy it over the phone," he decided. "You'd go for the best they've got and I only want it to look nice. When you're done with the house drive in with the car and pick it up. I'll be busy down in the fields with the truck."

"You're the boss."

"Yes, and don't forget it."

"How can I?"

I was almost to the door when Sharon spoke.

"Flint," she said to her husband. "Flint, I'd like to ride in with him."

"No, you stay here."

"Please, Flint," she insisted. "There are some things I have to get."

"Bert can pick them up for you."

Her laugh was forced.

"What? In a women's store? I told you I was short of bras and—well, you know."

Collins slapped the table top with the flat of his hand. The dishes bounced.

"I want this house cleaned up."

"I did clean it."

"Well—damnit, all right."

"Thanks, Flint."

"Just don't run up no bills. Make do what I give you."

Naturally."

The sun was fierce as I climbed the ladder but the fire was inside of me, a fire that twisted my belly into knots, knots that punched me in the spine. If I had disliked him before, or hated him, I guess the hate was complete then. It was one of those things over which a man has little or no control, a blind and terrible fury that overpowers your mind. Sure I had been going to leave him but lots of people leave jobs. I guess I could have left without my pay, that I could have managed, but I was determined not to let him get away with it.

About an hour later I was done with the house. The second coat had taken well and it looked pretty good with the white and the green trim around the windows.

Sharon was waiting for me in the station wagon, the door on her side open and her dress pulled up to let the slight breeze get at her legs. She covered her legs as I

got in but not soon enough, not before I had seen them up all the way to where her stockings fastened on her garter belt.

"You've got paint on the end of your nose," she said as we drove toward the road.

"All clowns have paint on their noses. Didn't you know that?"

"You're sore, aren't you?"

I made the turn onto the road.

"Just like somebody had been over me with a blow torch,' I told her.

"It wasn't the fair thing to do."

"Hardly. He's your husband, and I'm not forgetting that, but he's the worst slob I ever worked for."

We passed Lucy Martin's house and I felt guilty. Had she been waiting for me at night? Waiting and longing? Or had the waiting and the longing given away to tears of regret? I had no way of knowing. I only knew that I couldn't look at her again and think of myself as a man, at least not the sort of a man she deserved.

"He broke his heart," Sharon said as we were rolling down the highway.

"In what way?"

"He gave me twenty dollars."

"How lucky can you get?"

"He says two bras are enough."

"Maybe they are. You only wear one at a time."

"I never used to wear any." She opened the glove compartment and looked through it. "Do you know something, Bert?"

"If I knew anything I wouldn't be here."

"Or me. It's a lousy life." She closed the glove compartment. "I thought I had it rough before but I hadn't counted on a man by the name of Flint Collins." She paused. "I wouldn't have said that but I think we share the same opinion. Saturday night he took me to the dance at the hall but I might have well gone out and sat in the middle of one of the fields. I had to ask him for permission to dance and he kept saying no. All this time he's talking to some men how cheap you can farm if you use your head."

I swung around a load of chickens that were being carted off to market. The price of feed was so high that

many chicken farmers were selling out and getting into something else.

"It beats me how you ever got mixed up with him," I said.

"He promised me a great deal."

"I see."

"And we met in a bar."

"That follows."

"I was the only one at the bar when he came in and he sat down next to me. He said would I have a drink and I said I would. Later there was dinner, followed by more to drink and he was after the usual thing a man wants from a girl. I wouldn't and we had a couple of more dates. He talked about himself a lot, about how much money he had, and when he asked me to marry him I fell all the way down into the well. We drove to another state, married fast and he came on back to the farm. I had to wait to take care of some things at home."

She didn't say anything about her home but I could imagine what it had been like. A touch of poverty and a great deal of discouragement, none of the young fellows she liked earning enough to support her. Then Collins bought her a drink and she thought he had money to burn, that he'd be willing to burn it. Nobody could hold that against her too much. People need security and a girl most of all, even greater than a man. Without security a girl isn't a whole person.

When we got to town I dropped her off so she could shop and I went over to pick up the paint. The paint was ready, a barn red color that would cover nicely, and a man helped me load the cases into the station wagon. She was standing on the curb, a paper bag in her hand, when I returned for her.

"That didn't take long," she said as she got in.

"No reason why it should."

"I've got a little money left from the twenty."

"You're lucky." I nudged the Pontiac out into the street. "He can save it for his old age."

We rode a short distance before she spoke.

"Bert, he'll be busy in the fields."

"I suppose so."

She was silent again.

"I was wrong that first day," she said. "It wouldn't

be smart for us to go into a bar together but I've got enough for a six pack of beer."

"There was a grocery store in the next block.

"I don't know what we'd do with it."

"We'd drink it, silly."

"Where?"

"There are places you can stop."

"Yeah, and have him gut me when we get back to the farm."

"We'll say we met your former wife and she bought for us. He'd swallow that and probably he won't even notice."

I parked in front of the grocery store. Maybe I had been thinking of the same thing and I had been going to do it all along. She belonged to Collins and if I got to her he might not know it but I'd know it and in some strange fashion that would make me feel better, perhaps even superior to him. Was it right? Not for a moment. But was he right, shoving people who were defenseless against him?

The store had cold beer and although she had offered me money I paid for it myself. I almost forgot to get an opener.

"I thought it was hot in the city," she said when we were out of town. "But it's just as hot up here. Even at night, it's hot. There's only one window in our bedroom and just the bugs come in when it's open."

"Get screens."

"He says they break and they're a waste of money."

"Try getting a fan."

"You try getting it. What does he care? He walks out to the barn and it's cooler by the time he comes to bed."

I looked her over real good and she turned her head to meet my eyes. I didn't stop looking. A smile tugged at her lips and I gave her a grin.

"If it was me I wouldn't go out to any barn at night," I said. "I know what I'd do."

Her smile teased me.

"And what would you do, Bert?" she inquired.

"If you don't know I won't tell you." I had to watch the road because of the curves. "And he ought to be man enough to do the same thing."

"He only cares about himself. Not me. Himself."

I thought I knew what she was talking about, but I

didn't pursue the issue. Most girls won't say much more than that, not unless you're very friendly with them. They have feelings and desires, too, but generally they're slower to respond than a man. I guess a woman has to feel needed and wanted whereas a man merely has to have sex. Emily and I had gotten along well that way but the trouble had been that she had gotten along too well with other men in the same manner. Don't ask me why I even thought about her. She was a tramp to end all tramps and she was out of my life.

At one point along the road there was a place where some ambitious person had tried to construct a picnic area and while they had failed—not even the table was finished—there was a little road leading back into the woods. I backed the station wagon in there, hit a rock on the first attempt but made it on the second one. The low trees were all around us and it would have been very difficult for anybody passing to tell who we were.

"I'm dying for a beer," she said.

I figured she was dying for something else, too, but I merely nodded and opened a couple of cans. She reached for one and our hands touched. She didn't take the can right away. She ran her hand up my arm, pulling at the hairs, and patted me on the side of the face.

"He'd scream if he knew about this," she said. "One of the hired men and his wife parked in the woods." She laughed and lifted her can. "Here's to a human hog, Bert. My father used to say that from a pig you get a grunt. You do."

We drank our beer and I didn't talk. If she didn't love Collins there was no sense of her staying with him. At least there wasn't any cause that I knew about. She had made a mistake, worse than the one I'd made, but she could leave him whenever she felt like it. She wouldn't be the first girl who had reached for the sun and caught her hands full of dirt.

"Sometimes I don't think you like me," she said as I was opening up fresh cans.

"What makes you think that."

"You. The way you act. I suggest this and you just sit there."

"What would you do if you were me?"

"The same as any man would do," she countered.

I wanted to drive the nail into Collins so that he'd know it had been done and I guess I wanted her, too. Yet something held me back, a little warning inside of me that said it was all right to live dangerously but sort of dumb to die for it. Collins was the kind of a man who would kill to keep what was his and I had no desire to go in that direction at such an early age.

"I'd like to be loaded with money," she said after a while.

"Who wouldn't?"

She moved across the seat toward me, picked up what was left of the six pack and put it on my lap.

"There are ways, Bert."

"I've heard there are but I don't know of any. Painting for forty bucks a week isn't one of them. Take it from me."

She leaned her shoulder against my arm, put her free hand down on one of my legs.

"Bert," she said, her voice low. "Bert, what are you waiting for?"

I didn't reach out and start the car because my hate for Collins wasn't enough to make me go for her or because she wasn't as willing as a wife after a vacation alone. I started the car and pulled out into the highway because the mention of money bored into my skull and I knew that only one thing would ever bring her any. And I wasn't having a part of that, not then or any other time. I hated Collins all right but the hate lacked the strength to give me any idea about pushing him into his grave.

"Look at what you missed," she said as I drove toward the farm.

I looked. Her dress buttoned down the front and she had opened it up. She was wearing one of those bras that hooked in front and she had opened that up, too. She was all naked up there, her hands cupping her breasts, the wonder at her being so big causing my head to throb.

"Cripes," I breathed.

After that I drove like a maniac.

A man can stand just so much.

And something warned me that she was dangerous.

More dangerous than Collins himself.

"You're yellow," she said with contempt.

I didn't try to defend myself.

I was.

CHAPTER SIX

For a few days I didn't do any painting on the barn. It was good weather to paint, clear and hot and fine, but Collins was worried about his hay and clover and he made us all work in the fields. And I mean everybody. That included Sharon and she hated every minute of it.

"I should have lived so long," she said to me in disgust.

She had been bitter toward me after that day coming from town but she had gotten over it. Like a lot of people who don't always get what they want she may have held a grudge but she didn't show it. For my part I only had to look at her and the word "yellow" kept coming back to me. Maybe that was the word for it. Maybe I didn't have any guts or I'd have gone for Collins and I'd have gotten my money or broken his arm for my pay. Still, I didn't and I guess I didn't like the haying job any better than Sharon did. Of course the cutting tractor got ahead of us and Collins shouted and cursed, making us go back to the fields after supper.

"Not tonight," I heard Sharon say to him in the hall one night.

He'd been out to the barn and he'd been drinking. It wasn't hard to know when he'd had more than he should. He always walked heavy when he had a stomach full of booze.

"Why not?" he had demanded.

"Because I'm tired, that's why not."

"Shut up and get into the room."

"Oh, to hell with you."

On Friday morning she appeared in shorts and halter and there was a bitter fight over that. Collins insisted that she wear a dress but she refused. She pointed out that Norma dressed for the kind of work she was doing and he finally gave in. Foster liked that. If anybody could

fill a set of shorts and halter it was Sharon Collins. She filled them until she was ready to spill outside.

"I'd give my right arm for some of that," Clem Foster said to me on the way down to the field.

"It will probably be your neck."

"Well, I'd give that, too."

I glanced at him and he didn't look good. He hadn't been sleeping in his room for the last couple of nights and that meant he was busy with some female. I had reached the conclusion that the female was my former wife.

"How come you left her?" he asked me.

"Who?"

"Emily. Is there anybody else you might have left?"

The grass was wet with dew under my feet and I could feel it soaking through my canvas shoes. I needed other shoes but there just wasn't any money to get them. I'd gotten the thing on the money order straightened out all right but I'd had Foster pick up pants and a shirt for me in town and those, added to cigarettes, had cleaned me out.

"Leave her alone," I told him.

"What's it to you?"

"Nothing."

"So?"

"She's bad news, Clem. You get in with her and she'll drag you down."

"I should worry," he said. "She's got a room and that makes it nice. But she's still got the torch out for you. She thinks you two are going back together again and she's willing to wait for that. I hope you stay mad at her for a long while. It's great for me and it's cheaper. After two beers we go to her room."

We were working in one of the distant fields and it took us a while to get there. The others had gone on by truck but there had been a man in with a cow, early, and I'd helped Foster with the bull. He wouldn't work with the bull alone. He was afraid of the animal and he was justified in that feeling. The bull seemed to be getting meaner all the time and you only had to look into his eyes to see that he would take advantage of you if he could.

At first I had been a little upset about Foster seeing

Emily but now it didn't bother me very much. If she got into trouble that had nothing to do with me. And if she met a man she liked she might move on. For the present moving on was almost impossible for me. The time for that had been the week before and I hadn't done it. I'd wanted my pay and Collins had given me the back of his hand.

We got busy as soon as we reached the field and about ten Norma was sick again. I glanced at Weber when she got sick and he looked even worse than she did. It was plain that he wanted to go to her, comfort her, but he couldn't Collins was right there and he didn't miss anything. I won't say that he did much himself but he rode the rest of us. Maybe he was a little easier on Sharon but not much.

"Cut out faking," he yelled at his daughter. "If you ain't well we'll get a damned doctor."

She lifted her face. It was white, terrified.

"I don't want any doctor, Pa."

"Then stop putting on. You think this stuff is going to get into the barn by itself?"

She walked away from him, her shoulders hunched. Weber took a drink of water from the jug that we carried with us but some of it wouldn't stay down. He was just as miserable as the girl and he was living in a hell all of his own. If he had been single he could have married her but when he had a wife and kids what was there for him to do? I crossed over and said something to him. It made me feel better to do that. I thought I had it rough but I couldn't compare my troubles to his. For Weber there didn't seem to be any solution.

Just before noon the baler broke down. Foster had predicted that this was going to happen but I didn't know much about the machine and I hadn't taken him seriously.

"Damn," Collins roared. "What the hell is this? Who did it?"

Of course nobody had done it but he cursed violently and blamed all of us. It wasn't reasonable but then he wasn't a reasonable man.

"Foster! You lazy tramp, fix it!"

Foster tried and so did Weber. I was no help with a thing like that so I just stood there. As Collins bent

over the machine I felt warm flesh brush against my arm. It was Sharon and she was smiling. I moved away from her because she shouldn't have done it.

"Chicken," she said under her breath.

Norma was over near the woods being sick again but Collins was too busy to notice. Collins pushed Weber and Foster aside, reminding them that they were ignorant, and he struggled with the machine for ten or fifteen minutes. He told Foster to try it again and Foster did. Nothing moved.

"I'll have to get somebody from town," Collins said at last. His face was stormy. "Men who work on farms should be able to take care of these things. What kind of help have I got?"

"That piece of equipment is old," Foster said.

Collins was furious.

"Button your mouth and drive the truck, Foster."

We all rode back to the house in the truck. Norma sat on the bare floor, her hands over her stomach, staring.

"It'll be all right," Weber said to her. Sharon was up front in the cab with her husband and Foster. "It's got to be all right."

She started to cry.

Lunch was an ordeal. Collins had arranged for a man to come out and look at the baler right away, some guy who didn't charge too much, and he kept raving how much the delay was going to cost him. There was no point in putting more hay onto the ground until the baler was fixed and the truck wasn't big enough to bring up loose loads. Then he said that it had been better when he had first gone into farming, using horses and a wagon, and that the big companies just cheated everybody by putting out junk.

All this time his wife sat across from me eating lightly of a salad, and I don't think her eyes left my face. When she caught me looking at the swells of her breasts she smiled and I was almost sorry that I hadn't done something with her in the station wagon. Then, immediately, I was glad that I hadn't. I had been thinking about it a lot and I had arrived at the conclusion that she had married Collins for what she could get. That was no concern of mine but there would only be one way to get what he had and I wasn't going to do that for her

or anybody else.

"You paint on the barn," Collins said to me. "Nail down the boards as you go along and make her solid. If I'm paying you to do a job I want it done right."

"Okay."

I was working on the barn when the man came to see about the baler and Collins rode down to the field with him. They were gone a long time. The only reason I talked to Collins when he came back was because I had to come off the ladder to get some more nails—that siding was in bad shape—and the man left him off in front of the barn.

"I'll see you dead before I pay that price," Collins called after the man as the car drove off. "Dead, and I wouldn't pay it then."

I took some nails out of a can.

"You must have gotten the business," I said to him. "And you claimed he'd come out cheap."

Collins kicked a loose stone out of the way.

"Well, the call was cheap enough," he admitted, which was unusual for him to admit that anything had been cheap. "But there's no fix to that baler. Just like I told you at lunch, the big companies screw you. They take your money and then they screw you down into the ground." He wiped the sweat from his face. "So I've got to get a new one. What he wanted was out of this world. I can do better in the county seat."

The county seat was about sixty miles and at this time of the day he wouldn't get there before the equipment people closed.

"I guess that's a trip for you tomorrow," I said.

He frowned and kicked another stone.

"No, I'm going over right away. I know a man and I can stay the night with him. Won't cost me nothing and I'll be there early in the morning. If they get the lead out of their feet we can be back at the hay on Sunday. You know what it's going to cost me if we get rain? With what we've got down? Seems like a farmer ought to be able to sue those people."

I put one foot on the bottom rung of the ladder.

"I'd like some money before you go," I said. "This guy happens to be broke."

"Forbes, you know what I told you. Get your painting

done and you'll have your money." He thought a moment. "Less the five dollars you owe me from that deal with the bull."

My temper began to boil. I wasn't worried about the five dollars, although it wasn't right, but I couldn't go around with nothing in my pocket. I had cigarettes for about a week but that was all.

"Maybe I'd like to go down to the bar for a beer,"

I said. "You think it's hot out there in the fields but you should be working against this building. The sun hits it and comes right back into your face. And what else is there to do around here but have a beer? I don't see any movie houses."

He ignored the remark. That wasn't like him. Mostly, he was ready to shout about anything. But probably he was thinking about who he could gyp in the county seat.

"No money," he said. "But I'll stop on my way out and tell the man to give you credit for drinks."

"Credit in a bar is outside the law."

"What's it to you? And who gives a damn about the law? I shouldn't even do it but a little beer won't hurt you none. You drink there and I'll pay the ticket. But it comes out of your wages."

"Without a doubt."

He motioned to the ladder.

"Now stop wasting time and put some paint on this barn. It'll be winter before you make up your mind to find some ambition."

I thanked him for the arrangement about the beer and went up the ladder. His gesture didn't amount to much but at least I had a place to go at night. I was like a man alone on an island in my room and I didn't enjoy talking to Weber. All he did was feel sorry for himself. It wasn't any relaxation to spend time with him.

When Collins left he drove away alone and I didn't care for that. Norma would probably sneak over to see Weber, crying her heart out, worrying, and I'd be alone in the house with Sharon. As for going to the bar I could have gotten along without it — getting drinks on credit wasn't exactly my idea of living — but if Sharon and I were together I didn't know how far it would go. I'd used my brains in the station wagon, even after she'd

tormented me with part of her naked body, but I couldn't be sure that I would have so much sense the next time. A man tells himself that he isn't going to have anything to do with a particular woman, tells himself that she can bring him grief, but the next moment she's in his arms, alive and needing, and he becomes lost in her flesh. You read about it in the papers almost every day, about some guy who went for the wrong woman and got a bullet in his head for his folly. Or it could be the other way around. It's anybody's choice.

I worked until five and I was covered with dirt when I came down to the ground. I picked up a rag, spilled some turpentine on it and removed the paint from my hands and arms. Some painters can work all day long and not get a spot on them. I don't know how they do it.

Supper was on the table when I entered the kitchen. Norma sat near one of the windows, looking out, and Sharon was fixing a steak.

"That'll cost you your life," I said jokingly. I'm help."

She turned her head and wrinkled up her nose.

"You stink of paint or something," she said.

"Give me a chance to wash, will you?"

I washed in the kitchen sink, using some cleanser from underneath, and rinsed with cold water. Then I walked over to the table and sat down.

"Where's Weber?" I wanted to know. I hadn't helped with the milking and I hadn't seen him. As for Foster he hadn't been having supper with us for several days.

"He didn't want to eat," Sharon said. "If you ask me he's upset about something."

Norma joined us at the table but she only picked at her food. She didn't talk unless she was spoken to and then she didn't hear what was said half of the time.

"It must be the sun," she replied once when Sharon inquired what was wrong. "They say the sun gets you if you have too much of it."

The steak was good and so was everything else. I was in my usual place at the table, Sharon across from me, and her halter had slid down some. Most of my attention was taken up by the food on my plate but some of it was directed at her. I remembered her opening up her dress, of freeing her bra, of showing herself to me. Sud-

denly, I stopped being hungry.

"It was swell," I said as I got up. "There's nothing like steak to please a man's stomach."

"You mean, that comes first?" Her voice held a hidden meaning.

"Of course. Always."

I went up to my room and got out of my work clothes. While Sharon was doing the dishes I could shower, change, and leave for the bar. If Collins had taken care of my credit I would be all right but if he neglected it the walk would be for nothing.

Down the hall I locked the bathroom door and turned on the shower. I changed the water from hot to cold and then back to hot, standing under the spray and rubbing the soap into my skin. Finally I stepped out, shut off the water and dried with a huge towel. Why I always got out of the shower before I cut off the water I don't know, but it was a habit I had. I also had a habit of going to the shower in just my shorts. That night it proved to be almost a mistake.

She was waiting for me out in the hall.

"I said they made them big when they made you," she reminded me. "I wasn't lying."

I started past her but she grabbed one of my arms.

"Look," I said and jerked my arm loose from her hand.

"I also said you were chicken."

"Have it your way."

"And yellow."

"Now I know all about myself."

She took my arm again.

"Bert, don't be angry with me."

"I'm not."

Her eyes roamed my face.

"What is it then?"

"Like you said, I'm yellow."

"I didn't mean that. Honest."

"Well, it's true." This time I removed her hand gently. Her fingers curled over mine, tiny fingers that were soft and smooth. "There's also something else."

"I don't think she was listening to me."

"Bert, he isn't here."

"No."

"And Norma went out."

"I don't care."

She began to move in close to me but I got away from her. I could only fight so much against the promise of her body and I had just about reached my limit.

Once inside of the room I dressed quickly, putting on the new pants and shirt Foster had gotten for me. As I left the house I felt refreshed, hardly tired. For a second I thought of her in there alone, a woman of desire, but I continued walking.

When I got to Lucy's place I saw that her car wasn't in the yard. I wouldn't have stopped if it had been. The memory of her went to bed with me at night and got up with me in the morning. I didn't think that I could look at her and feel human. She had been a nice girl before that night and now she wasn't, not in the sense that a girl is supposed to be nice.

As soon as I got to the highway I caught a ride in an old truck. The farmer who was driving it asked me where I worked and I told him at Lonely Acres for Collins.

"You're a fool," he said. "Nobody likes him."

"Maybe you've got a job for me," I suggested.

"No, not that. Everybody has got their help and they aren't hiring."

I got off in front of the bar. There were a few parked cars and I recognized the one that Clem Foster owned. It crossed my mind that he hadn't made it with Emily, that she had found somebody else with more money to spend and that he'd come back to hunt down some farm girl who knew what the back roads were for.

I was wrong.

They were sitting together at the bar.

I took a stool at the opposite end and asked the man with the hearing aid if Collins had dropped in. He had and my credit was good. With Emily in the place I didn't want to stay there but I couldn't go anywhere else. There was only temptation at the farm and I didn't have any money. I ordered a beer.

"I hope Collins pays," the man said.

"Why wouldn't he?"

"Because he hates to pay anything. The last time I did this I had to wait six months to get my dough. This time he swore that he'd take care of it. He'd better. A man in this business has no legal way of collecting

bills."

The beer came and I lit a cigarette. Sometimes the beer wasn't cold but it was that night. Probably he hadn't had much business. His big blast came on Saturday night when the girls and fellows had money and they went crazy.

I was in my third beer when Emily came down the bar to sit beside me.

"Buy me one," she said.

I bought her one but I didn't say anything to her. There wasn't anything to say. We just didn't belong together any more.

"I keep thinking about the kid," she said. "All the time."

I nodded and toyed with my beer.

"I'll always think about him."

I gave it to her straight.

"Keep it up with Clem Foster and you'll have another one to think about."

"He isn't much," she agreed. She pressed one of her legs against mine. "What's it to you? You don't care."

"I don't."

"He said you planned to leave the farm."

"Yeah, but there was the slight matter of money."

"So you're stuck."

"More than that. I'm trapped."

She called out for another drink for herself.

"I've got a few dollars, Bert."

"You're lucky. Keep it."

"Enough to take a bus out of here. Enough for two tickets."

"No."

She didn't waste any time on the drink.

"Why don't you talk to me when I phone the farm?" she asked.

"I don't want to."

"Then I shouldn't call?"

"No."

I could see that Foster wasn't happy about her talking to me and it didn't make me very happy either. You promise yourself that you're going to drown the past but it keeps coming back. You remember the work, how hard it could be at times, and you remember the nights

when you have known pleasure with your wife. It just proves that the only thing that dies is people.

I was looking into the mirror behind the bar when I saw the door open and Lucy Martin come in.

I wanted to run and hide.

But I couldn't.

The moment I had dreaded was there.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lucy sat down at the middle of the bar and she didn't glance in my direction once. She wore a pale yellow dress and her blonde hair fell in natural waves almost to her shoulders. The dress clung to her body, revealing all of the curves that had been mine for a day and a night.

"Sexy slut," Emily said.

"Shut up."

"She comes into the diner."

"Shut up."

"Maybe you think that's meant for you."

"Get out of here," I said savagely. "Crawl up out of the sewer and chin yourself on the curb."

That burned her and she left me. A couple of minutes later she was dancing with Foster. She danced close and anybody who looked at her could tell what she was. No good. She never had been and she never would be.

I carried my glass along the bar and sat down next to Lucy. She turned her head toward me briefly, then away.

"I'm sorry, Lucy," I said.

"Leave me alone, Bert. Haven't you done enough?"

"I've been busy."

"When? Last Saturday night and Sunday?" Her tone was bitter.

"Gee, I said I was sorry."

"A lot of good that does me."

I waved for a couple of drinks.

"I didn't know," I told her. "I had no way of knowing. If I had—well, it might have been different."

She looked at me then.

"What did you think I was?"

"How could I have realized? You hardly ever find a girl like that any more."

"And now I'm not one of them, is that it? Does that satisfy you?"

I spread my hands wide and studied my fingers. There was still some paint on one of them. If the paint stuck to the barn the way it had to my skin the job would last forever.

"Lucy, those things happen. You can't blame any one person. You hit the right moment and you let yourself go. Maybe it's wrong but it's life."

She swung around on the stool, facing me.

"Bert," she said seriously. "Bert, what if you made me—that way?"

I had thought about that, too.

"There's only one thing we could do, I replied.

She shook her head.

"I don't know if I'd want to or not. I waited for you every night."

"Well, it wasn't my fault. That Collins is a fiend. We were in the hay until dark."

"You could have let me know. I've got a phone and so has he. He didn't have to know who you were calling."

"I didn't think of it."

"Or you didn't care? You got what you wanted and you didn't care?"

I felt sorry for her but she annoyed me.

"Stop twisting things," I said. "It's hell there on that farm and I have to do what I'm told."

"Look at your former wife." The music was playing again.

"I'm not interested."

"Is that the kind of a woman who pleases you?"

"If she was I'd still be married to her."

For the first time since we'd been talking she smiled.

"Bert, forgive me. I'm just upset."

"Sure."

"I came in here to see you. I couldn't miss those big shoulders of yours from the highway and I was hoping that we could be friendly. I even had to force myself to be nasty."

"It's all right." It wasn't, not all the way, but I told her that. "I understand."

We had another drink and the man marked the amount down in a pad.

"I may lose the farm," she said. "I didn't know it until today. That's why I was late getting home."

"How could you lose it?"

"Through Flint Collins."

The beer tasted funny when she said that.

"He gets into everything," I said. "Only I thought he wanted to buy it and you wouldn't sell. He can't drive you into selling if you don't want to."

"It's more than that. He stopped off on his way through town this afternoon and saw my lawyer. My lawyer called me at the hospital."

"I'm listening." I was, hard.

"He had a note signed by my father for five thousand dollars."

"That's bad," I decided.

She wasn't smiling now.

"But it isn't true, Bert. I know about the note. My father was friendly with Collins at the time and Collins offered to loan him the money when he needed it. I was there when Collins brought the money to the house. It was all in cash and he said something about wanting to be repaid in cash because of some tax dodge he was pulling, that cash couldn't be traced and a check could. My mother and I were there the day my father gave Collins the money, in cash, just like he asked. Collins claimed he had mislaid the note and my father was too trusting. My father said for him to tear it up when he found it or send it back. Then they went on that trip and they were killed. Collins said nothing about the note when he wanted me to sell but now he's using it. I'm the only one who knows the truth but that isn't enough. He's got the note and since there's no record of it being paid it's legal."

I ran the fingers of one hand through my hair. Wasn't there anything that man wouldn't do? It didn't seem as though there was. He crushed everybody in front of him and he didn't care about the blood they spilled.

"It's a lousy break," I agreed. "But the bank should loan it to you."

"How would I pay off such a loan on my salary?"

"I don't know." Nurses don't get rich.

"And if I ever operated the farm I'd need to borrow all I could. Five thousand would hurt and make it next to impossible. Cows cost money and so does equipment." She sighed wearily. "So here I am, Bert. In a hole and no way of digging out of it. Everything is on his side."

"Maybe I can get the note back from him," I said.

"How? I don't have to tell you what he's like. He waited until the farm was run down and then he closed in on me. I'll just have to take the kind of beating that he's given to everybody else. And he doesn't have to do it, Bert. He's worth a pile of money."

"I'll try and think of something."

"If you can you're better than I am. Or the lawyer."

We didn't have much more to drink after that. She was too stunned to enjoy it. The dream she had been carrying with her was being swept away and she was powerless to prevent it. The dead couldn't talk and only the dead could help her. The dead—or, perhaps, me. I knew there would be violence in whatever I did but this added to my hate for Collins and I didn't believe that I would avoid anything that I had to do.

Emily and Foster had moved to a table by the time we left and her dress was up high on her legs, Foster's hand resting upon one of them. I wondered why I had ever married her, slept with her, tried to overlook her faults so that the marriage would work. There wasn't any logical explanation for those things except that I wanted something, somebody, of my own and I had been willing to try and keep it.

"You were right about the car," Lucy said as she swung out onto the highway. "It was the generator. Something about brushes."

I wanted to be driving the car, to have my right arm around her shoulders, my hand wandering over the delights of her body, to have nothing but the road and the night ahead of us. Then I wanted to stop the car, giving her my love, receiving her love in return, telling her over and over again that things would work out.

But it didn't go that way.

When she reached the lane that led up to her house

she pulled off the road and halted the car.

"Don't get into trouble over me," she said.

"Trouble I can take."

"Yes, but where does it get you. And he's got the note. Nobody can change that."

"I'll see." I started to open the door on my side, then hesitated. "You got any beer?"

"I have some beer but you'd better not come up."

"Aw, it's only for a beer."

She leaned across the seat to give me a kiss on the cheek.

"You know what we'd do once we got into the house, Bert."

"I'd promise not to go that far."

"But I might make you break it."

"You?" I was amazed.

She put both hands on the wheel.

"Bert, it's not easy for a girl. I've always been decent until—well, honestly, I don't feel any less decent now. They say what we had is for marriage but it was almost like that. I've gone with boys, kissed some of them because it was expected, but on Saturday night I knew that it had to be everything. And on Sunday, too. We weren't drinking then and it wasn't that. It was real just belonging to each other and the price didn't enter into it."

"Lucy," I said, reaching for her, inflamed by her admission.

She avoided me and somehow hit the horn. The horn blew, shattering the silence of the night.

"No, Bert. Let's be sure. Let's be sensible about this. You're working for next to nothing and I'm losing what I've got. We have to have more than that and not—just the other. The other is for almost anybody but we have to make this between us sort of special. I know how you feel. I see it in the hospital, how men feel. And I feel the same. Only—only it has to be wonderful for us. We have to plan and think and look forward to what we can have."

I attempted to kiss her before I got out of the car but she pushed me away. The push didn't mean anything and I could have crushed her except that even in my desire I knew that she didn't deserve such treatment.

"I'll see you," I said as I stood there on the ground.

"Please, Bert. I'd like that."

I closed the door. There was something wrong with the catch and I had to slam it twice. She ought to have it repaired. Somebody could fall out and get injured.

"Don't say anything to Collins," she said in deep concern.

"Of course not."

"I—maybe I shouldn't have told you."

"There's no reason why not."

"Because of you. You're big. You're strong and men do things when they're angry. It's not worth it and I'll worry about you."

I wished she'd do something else about me just then.

"Goodnight," I said.

"Bert—"

I turned and walked to the road, swinging left. I didn't want to talk about Collins any more. Talk wouldn't make an impression on that sort of a man. I wanted to think about him, of my fist in his face, all of the power I had behind it, my knee lifting into his belly, the gasp that would come from him as he sank to his knees. But I wouldn't let him stay there. I'd pull him upright, smashing him again and again, turning his features into a pulpy mass. But, while it made me feel better, I was aware of the fact that I wouldn't solve anything by such action. It wouldn't bring me my pay or the note that he held over her. No, there had to be another method.

Presently, I began to think about Lucy, too. She was the kind of a girl a man could take for a wife, not just for the enjoyment of sex but to know when you looked at her that she was somebody real and fine. And I had nothing to offer her. That was the miserable part about it. Nothing at all. I didn't even have enough money in my pocket for a beer or a package of cigarettes. I couldn't have purchased a four-cent postage stamp if they'd run a sale on them.

I guess everybody finds a time in their life when they'd like to go back and start all over again. I knew I did in that moment—but not for any forty dollars a week or working for Collins. Or with Emily who had offered slightly more than one thing, the thing you can find on street corners or in bars. Yes, start over again with Lucy, knowing that your love was complete, that the ring on her finger didn't represent a couple of bucks wasted on a

ceremony. Then, later on, a kid that was yours, your blood in the kid's veins, your lives now shared to the fullest.

Dreams?

Sure.

The kind of dreams that seldom come true when you start out wrong. And I'd started out wrong—with Bonnie, with others, with Emily.

There was a light on in Weber's room over the garage and it was very seldom that he was up this late. Probably he was talking to Norma, both of them dismayed by their ill luck, both of them scared. I felt a streak of cold shoot up my back in the warm night. I could see nothing but tragedy on this farm, the total eruption of violence that would leave somebody battered and torn.

The house was dark and I went in through the kitchen. I didn't turn on any lights. I moved slowly, speculating about Sharon Collins and I trusted that she was asleep.

When I reached my room I turned on a little lamp at the head of the table, the one next to the alarm clock, and I got out of my clothes. I hadn't been tired before but I was beginning to get that way. It wasn't just the work but a combination of the work and the heat that did it. I'd asked Collins about getting us some salt tablets but I guess he was of the opinion that they cost a quarter each.

I always sleep raw, my body cramped on the bed because the beds are never long enough, and I was raw when the door opened and I saw her standing there.

"Go back to bed," I told her.

Sharon Collins laughed and came into the room. She wore a pink negligee, something that she must have owned before coming to the farm because her husband wouldn't have paid for such nonsense, and her skin showed through the thin, pink material. Her breasts lifted proudly, firmly.

"I'll do what I want," she said and closed the door behind her.

I thought of putting something on but it was too late for that.

"You nuts?" I wanted to know.

"About some things."

"Just don't make me one of them."

She walked over to the dresser and helped herself to a cigarette. She wasn't pretty. She was beautiful. No matter what else she might or might not be you couldn't take that away from her.

"I've got blisters on my hands," she said, exhaling the smoke.

"That's a rotten deal for you," I acknowledged. "If he's so hot on getting the hay in he should have hired a couple of more men."

She gave me a long look.

"Don't tell me funny stories, Bert. Men cost money and I get nothing. Wouldn't you call that a bargain?"

"Talk to him."

"Can anybody?"

I got a cigarette for myself. I wanted her out of there—and I didn't. She was a lonely wife and there wasn't anything about me that wasn't male. Maybe she was dangerous but there are moments when a man doesn't think about that.

"You married him," I reminded her.

"A correction, Bert. He bought me."

"Whatever you say."

"He had to have a toy for himself and I'm the toy." She spun furiously, wildly. "The trouble is he can't wind up my motor."

"I wouldn't know about that."

"Not unless I told you. And, anyway, what do you know?"

"Simply that his daughter will hear you in here with me and I'll be going down the road without my pay. If I live to get to the road," I added. "Men shoot other men sometimes."

She leaned against the dresser, her body liquid fire.

"Don't you think I'm worth it?"

"Once they plant me in the ground I wouldn't know."

She looked at me through the smoke.

"Norma isn't here."

"I wouldn't know about that either."

"I do. And I know where she goes. I've seen her at night from the window, sneaking over to the garage. She can't be seeing Foster so it must be Weber."

"Well," I said but I wasn't going to tell her that I knew already.

"I wouldn't squeal to my husband about her."

"That's decent of you."

Sharon shrugged.

"I can tell that she doesn't like me but I wouldn't hurt her. What kind of an existence is this for a young girl? No friends. Nobody. Just work."

"It isn't much," I said.

Sharon yawned and stretched. Looking at her was like wanting to get up onto a stage with a burlesque dancer. You knew that it was stupid but the force of temptation was there, your pulse growing faster as you saw the fullness of her breasts, the flat stomach under the material, the outline of her legs that could, if you wished, become so demanding.

"Bert, she's pregnant. She's as 'pregnant as they come." Sharon's eyes were dark, searching. "Without her being married I guess you'd go down a notch in your language and say that she was knocked up."

"Maybe you're right," I conceded, still revealing nothing.

"Of course I am. A woman gets sick that way lots of times when she's carrying nine months of waiting inside of her."

I walked over and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Does your old man know about this?" I asked.

"Why should he? He thinks it's a fake and he cares more about that rotten hay than anything else."

"I hope it rains tonight," I said.

She reached up to cup one of her breasts under the negligee.

"And I hope it rains for a week. I hope the whole stinking farm turns into a lake."

I leaned forward, my elbows on my knees, shifting the cigarette so that the smoke didn't come up into my eyes. Mine wasn't the only hate. She had one, too—a violent hate that possibly reached down into her insides.

"I can get us a drink," she said.

"No. I had something before."

"And what else?"

"Nothing." It hadn't been my fault. "Nothing at all."

Her laugh filled the room.

"There's another thing you could have."

"I couldn't look at her. I couldn't look at her and not

feel a scream flood my skull with a tremendous need for her. He was away. We were alone. Tomorrow life would go on. It usually did. Tomorrow he would return and I wouldn't touch her again. Only I knew that I would, knew that I couldn't risk it.

"Go back to bed," I told her again.

She was quiet for so long that I did look at her. Her mouth was red and wet and smiling.

"I am, Bert. Here."

"Hell," I said.

Seconds later she stood before me. She was nude, still smiling, her body a flaming torment of smooth curves, her eyes hungry. I swallowed once, swallowed twice, and put my hands out for her. I had, finally, reached my limit, the limit beyond which only stretches the uncertain seas of passion.

"I want you to do something for me," I said as I pulled her down to the bed with me, thinking about that note Collins had, that she could get it from him, steal it if necessary.

Her lips blazed across my mouth, eagerly.

"Don't talk," she murmured. "Right now there's only one thing."

She spoke the truth. There was just one thing and she was like an inferno of lust, begging and demanding, her body shaking wildly in my arms as she sought and found the ultimate.

I had never known anybody like her before.

It was the only time that I had to quit.

Man or no man she was too much for me.

Until dawn.

And then I was her master.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Collins felt pretty good after he got to the farm on Saturday and all day Sunday. But the only reason that he felt that way was because he had pulled a dishonest deal.

"Just wait until they get that baler back to the county seat," he bragged. "I told them that it run fine and I was just changing for a newer model. The guy believed me and he gave me a big allowance."

"What do you do if you want to buy something from him again?" I asked.

"I won't. I'll find somebody else. He got his right where he deserved to get it. A friend? What the hell do I care about him?"

"You probably wouldn't."

"Shut up and climb that ladder."

It was hot up there, hot and dirty, but I was glad to be out of the fields. I didn't want any part of them. Down there I'd see Norma getting sick and that depressed me. She wasn't even out of her teens and she had all of that misery in front of her. And she couldn't leave.

What could she do? From what I could gather she hadn't been very good in high school, barely graduating with a local diploma, and she hadn't taken many subjects that would be of much help in getting a job. She had to stick and hang, waiting for the worst to happen. So did Weber. Either he didn't have the guts to go away or he was staying in the hope that he could somehow do the right thing by her. He wasn't eating at the table and he looked terrible but he wasn't the only one who had lost his taste for food. I know I had lost mine.

Whenever I saw Sharon she smiled and I knew what the smile meant. It meant more of the same for us and it also told me she didn't know how we could arrange it. Now that she had been mine I regarded her in a different light. Her marriage was a hopeless mess and she was a woman of desire. Once a man was in her arms he never had to wish for more. And she wasn't at all like Lucy or Emily or the others had been. Still it scared me a little, knowing that she was already taken, and when I thought of that I painted all the harder.

Saturday night I worked late, mostly because Collins said he might do something about my pay, and I didn't go up the road to see Lucy or to the bar. Somewhere along the way with Sharon, her body frantic against mine in my room, I had lost part of what I had known with Lucy. She was a nice girl and I was nobody for her. As for the note I'd do what I could, just as any man

might. I told myself that it wouldn't go beyond that, that what we had for each other was too far apart. And there was another thing I told myself, a thing that it hurt to think about. No matter what Sharon's eyes said, no matter how much I longed for her, I wasn't going to touch her again. The terrible ache was there, eating at me like some disease, but having an affair with her simply didn't make sense.

Collins didn't keep his word about my pay. I should have realized that he wouldn't but I hadn't lost anything. I would have had to work until dark anyway if he had told me.

"After the barn I may want you to do some more painting for me," he said Sunday morning.

"There's only the shed."

"No, something else. I'm getting the Martin place next to me and if the house was painted up nice it could be sold to one of those stupid weekend farmers who come up from the city. They're turning up all over the county any more."

"Too much land," I said. "What would a city person want with all of that land?"

"Hell, you don't know anything, Forbes." As usual, he had a mouthful of bacon and eggs. "Who said anything about selling the land? Just the house and an acre of ground to go with it. I can keep the rest and get paid by the government for not planting or working it. That's what they're doing these days, paying farmers not to work. You read about that guy who bought a Caddy with the money the government paid him for not using his land?"

I hadn't read the account and I cared less. None of that stuff added up right in my mind. I knew that the practice was followed but I didn't understand it. Good growing land turned into weeds while people starved. However, the people behind it must know more than I did, which wouldn't have to be an awful lot.

"I thought she wouldn't sell," I said.

"Nobody asked you."

"Well, you brought up the subject."

"All right, so she won't sell. I'll get it anyway. And I'll get it for peanuts. If I strip her broke she can go out and sell her fanny. Her fanny ought to be worth as much

as the farm. They say some men pay big for a girl like that." He glanced at his wife. "That's one thing I don't buy. A woman should be for free and glad that she's got a man."

He was a thief, a glutton with money, but, like I said, it was pretty good that day for him. He didn't bother me any at the barn that day and he even worked in the fields with the others. There was the threat of rain and since they had hay to get in I was able to clean up and leave the house before any of them arrived.

I walked up the road and I thought about that note. If Collins had it on his person I could take it away from him easily enough but I had no guarantee that he'd be carrying it. Of course I had been going to talk to Sharon about it, hoping that she'd steal the thing for me, but after considering it further I doubted that this plan would work. The note meant money for Collins and I couldn't see why she had married him except for money. If she stole from him she'd also be stealing from herself. I couldn't see her doing that.

Lucy's car was in her yard and I turned up the lane. I hadn't intended to do that, but to go on to the bar. Yet she was in the house and if she had a free beer for me it couldn't do any harm. After that night with Sharon I had just about forgotten about other women in a physical sense. Even though I might not ever sleep with her again, and I wouldn't—I kept telling myself I wouldn't—she had destroyed it for me with anybody else. Maybe in the future I'd find her twin and it would be all right.

I found Lucy resting on the grass in back of the house. She lay there in a beach robe and she had a pillow under her head.

"I heard you coming," she said and sat up.

I got down on the grass beside her. I could smell the grass and her perfume.

"How did you know that it was me?"

"Because you walk heavy." She picked a little blue flower out of the grass. "Besides, Clem Foster has got a car. You hear it rattle the whole length of the road."

I got out cigarettes.

"I thought he only came up here that one time."

"He was here last night."

"Huh."

"And he brought some beer. We sat on the porch and drank it."

I didn't like that.

"Well, what do you know," I said and lit a cigarette.

"I didn't like him at first."

"I don't like him now."

"Why? Because of him seeing your wife?"

"It never entered my mind, not this second. I guess it shook me when he said he was dating her. But it didn't last. Her life is her own."

She lay down again.

"He isn't so bad, Bert. He's wild and maybe he does harm but I don't think he really wants to hurt anybody. We just talked and had some beer. He—well, he didn't try anything. Mostly he talked about your former wife. They had some kind of trouble and she won't speak to him. He was lonely and he wanted a shoulder to cry on."

"You're a fool to have anything to do with him," I said. "If he keeps on coming here he'll get what he wants."

Her blue eyes were frank.

"That's saying he'll get what you had?"

For the first time since I had sat down beside her I realized that she had been drinking. I didn't hold that against her. She had enough on her shoulders to make her drink.

"I'm not after any fight," I said.

"Who's fighting?"

"Nobody. Yet."

She played with the belt on the robe.

"I'll see him if I want to, Bert."

"Go ahead."

She yawned.

"There's some beer in the refrigerator," she said. "But you'll have to get it yourself."

I couldn't see any use of hanging around her.

"No, I'll walk down to the bar. Collins put up some credit for me."

She was stung by my refusal.

"That's right, spend what you make."

"So what else is there to do?"

"Waste some more money and take an innocent farm girl off into the woods. Isn't that what you live for?"

I couldn't figure Lucy's attitude and I got to my feet. She was degrading what had been beautiful between us and I blamed it on whatever she had been drinking. Drinking, plus worries.

"Bert," she called out as I walked away from her.

I kept on going.

The shadows of evening were falling when I reached the highway and I moved along slowly. I had no claim to Lucy but I was concerned about her. That last night in her car, the way she had talked, I had thought she liked me but now it didn't seem to stand up. I had wanted to talk to her about the note, to get more details, and I hadn't done that. Well, what if I hadn't? She probably didn't know any more than she had already told me. If I helped her I'd have to do it blind. Then, too, why should I help her, supposing that I could? I knew the answer to that. She was a nice girl in an unfortunate position, almost like I had been when they had moved me from foster home to foster home, and it had nothing to do with sex. At least, it didn't have anything to do with sex just then.

Hate . . .

I didn't know, not even if I still had it for Collins. Sure he was mean and he had treated me unfairly about my pay but all people don't do things the same way, or think the same way, and some of it was my own fault for being there. Plenty of men cursed and raved and pushed their women around and you had to expect that

Hate . . .

I'd had her. I'd had his wife. I'd had her, her naked body pressed tightly to mine, and what had it changed? It hadn't changed anything. She was still married to him, her favors his for the asking, and I was just as broke as I had been. That proved hate, or what you took to be hate, only gave you a sense of shame once you had gone beyond the limits of the normal.

Sunday night was a slow night at the bar and there were only two girls sitting on stools when I got there. They were young girls, either from the farms or town, and I only had to look at them once to know what they were. Pretty girls who were available if they liked a man. However, I wasn't interested and I didn't pay any

attention to them.

"You can't get anything," the man with the hearing aid said to me.

"Aw, that was all settled. How many times do I have to tell you?"

He wiped off the bar.

"You don't have to tell me any."

"But —"

"So Collins changed his mind."

"When?"

"Five minutes ago, on the phone."

Maybe some of the hate came back just then.

"I don't know why," I said.

"He does. He said you didn't do enough work today, that you quit too early. A man, he says, who won't work can't drink."

"I'll be damned."

"But have one on the house."

"Thanks."

He drew the beer and I drank it thoughtfully. Hate, the little things piling on top of other things and eventually making a big pile. How long would it be until somebody set fire to the pile and it went up in flames? Like that one construction job I had been on. I hadn't liked the boss because he hadn't known his work. He'd had me in a ditch, laying up cinder blocks when the blocks should have been cement. Then the one wall had caved in, almost trapping me, and he'd come at me, screaming, with a pick. He hadn't used the pick on me. I'd stepped aside, grabbing one of his arms as he'd brought it down, forcing the instrument from his hands, going back and up with his arm in a blind rage. Then I'd heard the bone snap, his cry of agony, and I'd walked off the job. Hate. Anger. Bad things but the things that most of us feel at one time or another. It's the situation that determines whether or not we become violent.

The girls at the bar had listened in on my trouble and one of them wanted to buy me a beer. I thanked her and refused. I knew how it would end if I started with her and I'd be disgusted with myself in the morning.

"It's all right," the girl assured me. "It isn't my money. It's money I'm saving for my boy friend."

"Then you'd better save it."

"For what? While he has his fun with another girl? Let the rotten slob pay. I'm tired of him anyhow."

Outside the night was warm and there were a lot of stars overhead. Obviously the threat of rain had passed, as it sometimes did. The morning would be clear and there would be work to be done.

A car came along but I declined the ride. Riding was too fast and I wanted time to think. I couldn't take it at the farm much longer and I had to push on, pay or no pay. Let Collins buy booze with it and brag how he'd put the hook into me. I'd had enough. But somehow I didn't want to go alone. I was sick of traveling alone, of being the same as I had been in a foster home, or never having anybody. Maybe I had thrilled to Sharon's passion, maybe I'd never know anything like it again, but Lucy was a nice girl and there was nothing to hold us in the county. She could nurse almost anywhere and I'd go back to construction work. She'd just have to accept the loss of the farm, unfair as it might be, and bury her bitterness in the future. And it didn't have to include marriage. There didn't have to be any ties. We could discover each other as we went along, the good and the bad, and we could settle that when the time was right.

As I approached Lucy's house I saw there was a light in the kitchen. I didn't know if Foster was there or not but when I got to the lane I turned in. I wasn't afraid of Foster. I wasn't too much afraid of anybody, just myself when I thought about Collins. Afraid of what I might do, all of me turning savage and brutal.

Foster's car was nowhere to be seen.

And I didn't knock.

I just walked into the kitchen.

Lucy was at the table, a can of beer in front of her, the ash tray filled with cigarette butts, the top of her beach robe parted in a most pleasing way.

"You didn't stay long," she said. "I thought you would considering how you left here."

"Collins jerked my credit and the guy wouldn't let me drink on my looks."

"So you came back here where you could drink free?"

"All right, I won't have any beer."

"No, take what you want. I don't care. I've had my share for one day." she smiled. "I never did that before."

I wanted the beer so I got one, also a can for her. There was plenty in the refrigerator.

"You've got a car," I said as I sat down on the chair next to her. "What are we staying around here for? By morning we could be long gone."

She turned, putting her back up against the wall. The opening in the robe became wider. I had thought she was naked underneath the robe but she wasn't. I could see her bra. It was black and I like black.

"Now that we've run away what are we going to do?" she asked.

"Get jobs."

"And live as man and wife?"

"That would be up to you."

"What would that solve?"

"More than what we're solving the way things are. Me with no pay and you with a farm that you're going to lose. How could we do any worse?"

"This is my farm," she said.

"Today. But not tomorrow."

She regarded me curiously.

"Bert, you want to get away from something else. Somebody else."

"Yeah, the woman who used to be my wife. She had no business following me."

"It's more than that."

My can was empty and I got another one from the refrigerator.

"You tell me," I said.

Lucy gave that some thought.

"Bert, did you wonder why I was cool to you outside on the grass?"

"Of course."

"And you don't know the reason for it?"

"If I did I wouldn't have wondered."

She thought some more. Her face was pretty but sad. So were her eyes.

"Maybe I shouldn't say anything," she decided.

"Okay."

"But I have to."

It came out then. Foster had shot his mouth off to her and he had been able to add ten and ten and come up with a total of nineteen. The reason he hadn't been

able to reach as far at twenty is because he'd had no proof.

"He had to know something about a cow being brought over for the bull Saturday morning," she said quietly. "Mrs. Collins had taken the call and she had to be asked. When he went in for breakfast he had Norma go up to the room to ask her. She wasn't in her room and she wasn't in any of the other rooms. The only room Norma didn't look in was yours. Later Mrs. Collins came downstairs, ahead of you. She had to be in your room, Bert."

I was surprised but I suppose I should have expected something like this. We had been careless, too intent upon satisfying our pleasures, and we had overslept on Saturday morning. Dawn had found us emotionally and physically exhausted, our bodies locked together as we had each followed our own dreams.

"Well, that explains it," I said and got some more beer for us. I didn't really want the beer. It was just something to do.

"You're a fool, Bert."

"I admit or deny nothing."

"And you've hurt me."

"Yes, I suppose I have -- if you believe it."

Her eyes were moist.

"What am I to believe?"

"I don't know."

"That you used me and then found somebody better?"

I felt as low as a guy pinned under a truck.

"I'm sorry, Lucy."

"So am I. Especially for you."

"Why me?"

"Because Collins will kill you if he finds out. And you've killed my love. What more can I say?" She smiled briefly. "If you've had enough beer I wish you'd go. Bert. And forget about doing anything over the note. You're in so deep now that you'll never get out."

I got up from the chair, moved to her side and bent over her. I knew that she didn't want me to kiss her, that my kiss was no longer important to her, but I did it anyway. Her lips were a firm line as my mouth lingered upon them, the feeling that I had known that first night with her coming again. I pushed one hand down inside the front of her robe, making her

jump as I seized the fullness of her bra, then let my hand wander down to the flat, naked warmth of her stomach.

"Damn you," she said and jerked free.

She was crying when I went out.

Afterward, entering the farm house, I could hear Collins and his wife fighting over something. Finally, stretched out on the bed in the darkness, Collins banged down the hall as he left the house, probably for the barn.

I didn't sleep much.

If Collins had found out about us I might not wake up.

CHAPTER NINE

Collins was back in his old form the next morning. Norma got sick at breakfast and he shouted and cursed for a full five minutes. No doubt Sharon knew all of the words herself but I was glad that she hadn't yet come downstairs so that she'd have to listen to him.

"By God, I'm going to take you to a doctor," he raved. "I'll make him give you some pills that'll pep you up."

Norma turned from the sink; she hadn't been able to make it to the bathroom. She looked helpless, alone.

"Pa, I don't want any doctor."

"Then straighten out. You think I want to spend the money for one?"

"I'll try," she said.

"And you work in the fields with the men."

She seemed more alone than ever.

"You didn't have to tell me that," she said.

He snarled over his eggs and made me change plates with him. I didn't care. Eggs are eggs.

"Got fooled at the bar last night, didn't you?" he said to me.

"Slightly."

"Work your rear off and I'll open the account again. Quit the way you did yesterday, right on the nose of five, and you can go dry."

"Those are normal hours." I knew that it was a waste

of time to say it.

"Normal? What's normal around here?"

"You could ask that three times and get the same answer. Nothing."

"Shut up, Forbes. Eat your food and get on the job."

"Sure."

"There's a cow coming in today. You take care of the bull I can't be sending a man up from the field for that."

"So how do I paint?"

He glared at me.

"With a brush, you fool. And you collect the twenty-five bucks. Try keeping it for yourself and I'll have you in jail."

We ate for a moment in silence. Norma stood with her back to the sink. She hadn't started to show yet but she wouldn't be able to stop it when she did.

"That bull is getting mean," Weber said. "He tried to crowd me into the wall the last time and he wasn't fooling about it."

"Have some guts," Collins said. "He's the best bull in the county and I'm keeping him. Nights I go out there just to look at that animal. I look at him and think about the ribbons he won."

Lunch was a hit or miss affair so we ate what we could but we knew better than to ask for seconds. Seconds didn't go with the job on this farm. It was lucky that he hadn't missed the steak from the freezer. He would have gone wild over that. All the meat he bought for us were cheap cuts and mostly fat.

When I went over to the barn Clem Foster followed me. He was taking a chance on doing that. He should be gassing up the truck and getting it ready.

"That old wife of yours has got a mind of her own," he said.

I opened a can of paint.

"Don't bother me," I told him.

He laughed.

"Well, naturally you wouldn't be hot for her. You've got something better out here."

"Meaning?"

"His wife. Mrs. Collins. Sharon."

I put the can of paint down and grabbed him by the front of the shirt.

"Stop talking about stuff that you don't know anything about," I warned him. "You spread a story like that and you'll never spread another one. That's a promise."

He was big but he was no match for me. The tan of his face became almost white.

"Look, I didn't say that to be fresh."

"Then cut it out." I guess my own face was white, too. "Keep what you think to yourself."

"Yeah, Forbes. You bet."

I let go of him. Collins was coming out of the house.

"Remember what I said, Foster."

He shrugged.

"Why should I care? I know where to get mine. If one won't another one will." He laughed. "All I can say you must have had something if you made it with that. One look at her and you want to run for the nearest bedroom."

I was up on the ladder when they left for the fields but Sharon wasn't with them. For all I knew she might not even be on the farm. That had been some row they'd had the night before, none of the words clear but angry, and she could have left. Still, I didn't believe that. She had too much to lose and nothing to gain.

The day wasn't as hot as it had been and it was nice working. There was a breeze blowing and on that section of the barn the siding was in fairly decent shape. Of course one coat of paint wasn't enough but that's what Collins had said. One coat. One coat and it was supposed to look like a new building. He was a nut all right.

I didn't go to the house for lunch, thinking that there wouldn't be anything, and the others didn't come up from the fields. Either they weren't eating or they'd taken sandwiches. I worked on through but it wasn't because I was frightened of Collins. It was simply that it was better to keep busy than to do nothing. I didn't think so much when I was occupied.

About one-thirty I saw Norma walking up from the fields. First she started for the house and then she came over to the barn. She stood at the bottom of the ladder for a long time before she spoke. I knew that she was there but I continued to slap the paint onto the boards. It went into them like it was water.

"Bert, can you come down?" she asked. "Just for a

minute?"

"I don't know why not."

She looked uncomfortable when I got down to the ground. It felt good to be off the round rungs of the ladder for a moment. Its difficult to remain in one position while you're painting. You have to keep shifting your feet around.

"What is it?" I inquired.

Her eyes wouldn't meet mine.

"I don't know you very well," she said.

"That's all right."

"How do you like the farm?"

"It could be better. That goes without saying."

"Not my father. I know how he is. Just the farm itself."

"Well, it's a good farm."

"I'll own it with that — that woman someday."

I doubted that she would once Collins found out what was wrong with her.

"Of course," I said.

"It would be a nice life for you, Bert."

"I won't be here. I'm only staying now because of the money he owes me."

This time our eyes met, holding.

"Or because of her?"

I looked up at the sky. It was bright and blue, not a cloud showing.

"You wanted something, Norma. What was it? I can't paint here on the ground."

"She's beautiful, isn't she? And I'm not."

"What's bothering you?" I insisted.

"I — well, you know how I'm treated here."

"Yeah. Terrible."

"And I've — I get sick."

"Lots of people do. You eat something and it comes up."

"It — it isn't that."

"You must know."

Her fists formed little knots.

"Art's a nice man," she said.

"Weaver? Yes, he is."

She brought her fists up to her breasts, pressing in, then lowered them to her stomach where she did the same thing.

"Bert, I think I can trust you."

"I believe you can. We haven't been friendly but I've got nothing against you. You've got a lousy existence. It isn't for a girl."

She nodded and looked down at her hands.

"I — Art and I went too far."

"I see."

"I'm — Bert, I'm pregnant!"

She burst out crying. I bled for her inside but there wasn't anything I could do about it. She just had to cry until she stopped. After a few minutes she got control of herself.

"That's rough," I said. "It almost always is." I remembered Emily, her swollen body. "It's bound to be rough on the girl," I added. It didn't help any but at least she knew that I was sorry for her.

Norma dried her eyes with the back of one hand.

"Art and I have been talking."

"I'd think that was smart."

"My father would kill me if he suspected."

"Or come close to it. Take a man like him and he goes all apart."

She glanced toward the house, then at me.

"You're free, aren't you, Bert?"

I didn't know what she was driving at.

"I'm divorced," I said.

"That's the same as being free. You could — Bert, I wouldn't ask Clem Foster this. I don't like him but I like you. And you're bigger than Clem. My father wouldn't dare take a swing at you."

"Say don't get me into this," I warned her.

"It wouldn't have to last if you didn't want it to."

"Come again."

Her eyes bored into my face.

"Bert, I need a husband. I need one bad. Art — you know how it is with Art. Married and a family and a nice wife. I — we couldn't break that up. So — well, you could marry me. My father would hate it but it would work out all right, better than the way it is for me now. There'd be a name for the baby and when I get my share of the farm you can have it. I —"

"Cripes," I said. "Do you have any idea what you're asking me to do?"

"It's a great deal," she admitted. "But I'll give you what I get. And there'll be money, plenty of money. I can say that and say the truth. I've seen his bank books. He made it all by being mean and cheating. I'm not like him. I wouldn't hide anything from you."

I guess there are some men who would have done it for the money, for what they could get, but I didn't see it that way. Yet I couldn't come right out and refuse her. She was no fool. She was aware of what Sharon and I had done. If she wanted to hurt me she could go to her father about that. It would just make a sorry mess that much worse.

"Let me think about it," I said.

"Please, Bert. There isn't much time. I had to come up from the fields because I was so sick. He won't put up with that. Then I have to consider the baby I'm carrying. It may be wrong and I'm scared but I want it."

"Yeah," I said and climbed the ladder again.

I didn't watch to see whether she went to the house or back to the fields. The paint had thickened in the can and I stirred it. I'd heard of a lot of deals but nothing that could match that one before. On the other hand I could see her point of view. She wasn't seeking love. She was out to save herself and she didn't care how she did it. No price was too great, no act of desperation too far out of reach.

But I couldn't do it. Not for her. Not for anybody. I didn't think so much of Art just then. He ought to walk up to Collins and tell him what he'd done, take whatever he got as a man. But Perhaps I was misjudging him. He had a family to lose and no doubt the sacrifice, if he loved them, was too great. Yet Norma hadn't gotten into trouble by herself — it had taken the two of them, their natural desires greater than their common sense. I guess. I honestly didn't know what I'd do if I were in his place.

At three I saw a cow coming up the lane. A girl of about eighteen, dressed in white blouse and dungarees, was leading it. Or I should say she was trying to lead the cow but it may have been the other way around. A cow with a pretty basic thing on her mind can't be trusted. She'll run and jump and once in a while kick. It isn't exactly a suitable chore for a female.

I descended the ladder and walked over to the girl. She stopped, holding the cow, and the bull bellowed inside the barn. You don't fool animals.

"I hope she's better afterward," the girl said.

"She will be."

"Pulled me down one of those hills. You'd think she wouldn't know that -- "

The girl broke off her words, her face flushing.

"Yes, you would," I agreed.

"Where do I take her?"

"Around back of the barn. Let her loose in the pen. And you can wait out here if you want."

"It's all right. I don't mind. This isn't the first time."

"Suit yourself."

She slapped the cow on the flank with the end of the lead rope.

"But I've never been here before," she yelled over her shoulder. "There was another farm where we used to go but my father wanted some good blood this time. Twenty-five dollars, isn't it?"

"That's right."

The girl had a fair figure, lithe and trim. In a couple of years she'd start bearing children, living on one of the farms. There would be no mystery about sex for her children. They'd grow up as she had, seeing it and accepting as a normal function of life.

I swung toward the entrance to the barn and then I saw Sharon coming from the house. She wore the usual shorts and halter to which Collins had finally consented and while the blue color was something different than I had seen on her before there was hardly enough material to the outfit to cover her. I grinned. That wasn't bad. Who wanted a girl to be covered?

"You bum," she laughed as she approached me. "I fix lunch for you and you didn't show up."

"I didn't want any."

She laughed again.

"I suppose there isn't anything else you want?"

I had said that I wouldn't, never again, but promises are made to be broken, aren't they? Besides, a promise is especially easy to break when you're looking at a body that's all woman, a woman who probably wants you, a woman who lifts to you in complete surrender, her kisses

ripping the top of your head off.

"I've got to see about that bull," I said and felt the sweat all over me.

"I know."

"You'd better go back to the house."

"For what?"

"Or down in the fields."

"The fields." She made a face. "They can go to the devil."

I couldn't keep the girl waiting and the bull was bel-
lowing his head off. I walked toward the barn and she
came with me, taking one of my hands in hers. I shook
it off.

"You want Norma to see?" I demanded. "She's guessed
enough already."

"That poor thing. She came in, tried something to
settle her stomach, and went off to finish the day. If
this hay doesn't get in pretty soon they'll cart her away
in a basket."

Once we were inside the barn she grabbed me, getting
in front so that I had come to a halt and tilted her face.
She wet her parted lips with the tip of her tongue.

"Kiss me, you big boy," she said. "Mash me in your
arms."

"Later."

"No, damnit. Now."

Her lips were fresh and warm, opening up as I brought
her to me, tasting faintly of something that she had been
drinking. She clawed at me with her hands, her body
lifting, the cries of her longing choking in her throat.
A throb began at the base of my neck, spread forward
across my head, became a blinding explosion between my
eyes. Half of me said that this was right, that we should
take from each other what we could have, and the other
half said it was wrong, that nothing but destruction
could come from it.

I pried her loose from me and moved in the direction
of the pen where the bull was pawing like a dog burying
a bone in a pile of rocks.

"Bert," she said.

"Take it easy, will you? I'm busy."

She didn't go over there with me this time but stayed
behind. I was happy that she did. I had trouble with

that crazy bull. Even with the staff fastened into the ring of his nose he was the next thing to being impossible. Before I could release him at the exit he almost took me outside with him. Art Weber was right. He was getting bad and somebody was going to get hurt.

It didn't take him long with the cow and I went out to get him. He didn't like that at all and he crowded me into the fence. The girl who had brought the cow screamed and I walloped the bull with the staff. He turned his head, snorting, and I hooked him up. Maybe I gave him some pain after that, yanking him into the barn. I couldn't have been less interested.

The girl was waiting for me near the fence with the money and I went out to collect it.

"Poor beast," she said, looking at the cow.

"Yeah."

The girl led the cow away and I returned to the barn. The bull was banging his head against one of the walls of his pen. I didn't think too highly of having anything to do with him again. If I was going to get killed I ought to have more than forty dollars a week for my trouble. Forty dollars which I hadn't been able to collect.

"I don't know what my husband sees in that creature," Sharon said when I got to her.

"Who would?"

"Did you collect?"

"You can be mighty sure of that."

She had done something with her halter but she hadn't pulled it up. Then I realized that she had untied it in back, that just the pressure of her arms against her body and what she had underneath it held the thing in place.

"How come you're spending the day at the house?" I asked her.

"Simple. We had a row last night."

"I heard it."

"He'd been drinking."

"That's a great time to have a fight."

"I told him that if I worked in the fields again he could stay out of my bed. And I meant it. I'm no horse or a slave. He decided to stay in my bed—after I got out of my work clothes and he saw what he would be missing. Maybe working would have been better. I hate his guts. He's like that bull. Nothing that should be beautiful,

the way we had it, gives him a second thought."

I felt the heat in the barn, the pressure of her closeness, the mounting need that could be satisfied in only one way, the way that led down a dead end street—with Collins at the foot of it.

"Tie yourself up," I told her. "You want my kettle to boil over?"

She stepped closer to me.

"Let it boil over," she said. "It'll put my fire out. You lit it Friday night and it's up to you."

"People are guessing, Sharon, and they guess pretty good."

"What's a guess?"

"Trouble."

"He'd believe me if I denied it. He'd believe me because he's crazy about what he bought. I'm like the equipment he's got around here. He thinks he's going to use me forever."

"And he will."

She laughed.

"Want to bet?"

"No, I don't bet."

I thought of the painting that I ought to be doing, of a former wife who was a slut, of what I had told myself about this girl, of Lucy Martin, of a girl named Norma—but it didn't do any good. We had the barn to ourselves and there wouldn't be any loads coming in that day. Upstairs it would be hot, like an oven turned up too high, and there was nothing except the bales of hay and the bare floor.

Nothing . . .

"You've got me," I said, my voice thick. "You've got me bad and all the way. You've got me where nobody else ever had me."

She smiled.

"A big man like you saying that?"

"Why fight it? You're what I've got to have and I'm a man. It's more than enough."

She took my hand and we walked to the stairs. There was no reason to talk, nothing to say. Her husband was down in the fields and we were in the barn.

Upstairs I broke open a bale of hay and scattered it on the floor. Collins wouldn't like that but he wouldn't

like what we were going to do either. He had it coming to him, all that he could get.

She was out of her things before I had finished with the hay, her body lowering into it, her naked curves taking me down to her.

"The same as before," she whispered as my hands sought and found her. "Always the same as before, Bert."

It was.

Only better.

The very best.

CHAPTER TEN

If it had been bad on the farm before it got worse after that. Or it improved. That, of course, was a matter of opinion.

Collins was drinking more than usual and he even took to drinking during the day. He was a rough character when he was sober but he became impossible after he took half a load on. Nobody seemed to know what was bothering him and Weber claimed that he'd just gotten so mean that he couldn't stand to live with himself. I thought that might be part of it but I also felt there had to be more. Nights I would hear him stumble through the hall on his way out to the barn. It was then that I wanted Sharon Collins, wanted her with a want that was a hopeless thing to fight. I'd lay there in the night, staring up into the darkness, listening for the kitchen door to close, wondering if it would be all right to go to her. But I didn't. Sometimes he stayed out at the barn an hour, sometimes less, and I couldn't risk it.

Days I painted on the barn and it was hell knowing she was over there in the house and I was up on a ladder. Collins just about gave up going down to the fields, except to tour them a couple of times a day to rave and rant. The rest of the hours he spent in the house and that meant I could only see her when we had meals. And that wasn't enough for me. It wouldn't have been enough for any man who had taken her body, experienced

the frantic waves of pleasure which she offered.

Collins began to get sore at me. I spent a lot of time nailing up the siding, fooling around, making the job last. If somebody came with a cow for the bull I took care of the thing, almost always scared of the animal, but in a way I welcomed the delay. I knew that when I was finished painting my job would be done, unless he got control of the Martin place. The end of the job would see me on the road again and I had reached the point where I didn't want to leave the farm, not without Sharon. But I also knew taking her along with me was out of the question. She had married the man for his money, certainly not his love, and she wasn't going to give up on that.

"I'll bust that Martin girl," Collins said one night at supper.

"She don't need no bust," Clem Foster snickered. Of late he had been staying in to eat and then going out later. "She's got plenty bust of her own."

It wasn't a nice thing to say in front of Sharon or Norma or any other woman.

"Bite off the end of your tongue," Collins told him. "And you've been going up there. I've seen your car parked at her house."

"Yeah, and what of it?"

"Only that you know how I feel about her. She's not reasonable and I don't want my help having anything to do with her. Go with some of the other girls you've been chasing."

"I'll do what I want," Foster declared.

Collins was livid.

"Damn it, you heard me!" he shouted. "You heard me plain."

Foster got up from the table.

"I'll do what I want," he repeated. "If you don't like it fire me."

Collins cursed, then remained silent for a moment.

"I can't fire you," he said in disgust. "Not now. Not during haying. Good hands are hard to find."

Foster halted at the door, smiling.

"So now I'm a good hand?"

"I didn't say that but you're better than nobody at all. Comes the stop in haying and I'll make up my mind

about you."

"Don't try holding my pay back. You do that and—"

"Get out of here, you lousy creep. You've got your gut full of food. Who wants to look at you?"

Every meal was like that, Collins surly in the morning and about two thirds plastered at night. It wasn't any pleasure eating in that house. Sharon was doing most of the cooking now and while she wasn't an expert she managed to get by. It was Collins and his mouth that ruined the food.

"You'd better wise up with that paint brush," he said to me. He hadn't shaved for a couple of days and he looked ugly, his gray beard almost white against his red face.

"I'm doing the best I can." I tried to be patient with him, to understand, but understanding him was out of the question. "You've let these buildings go for a long time."

"Don't tell me what I've done, Forbes. I own this farm and I run it how I want. Nobody tells me what to do."

"And nobody is telling you. If the siding isn't nailed down the water will get behind it and the wood will rot. What purpose of painting it serves after that?"

He leaned his elbows on the table, tilting it because the floor wasn't level, but I wasn't looking at him. I was looking at his wife across from me, the hunger that I could see in her eyes, the beautiful shoulders that rose up above the top of the halter.

"I could get another painter," he said.

"Yeah, for two bucks an hour."

"Shut up."

"Or more."

"Shut the hell up."

I shut up. I couldn't push him too far. When I had asked for credit at the bar again he had just walked away from me. And now he was into me for some fairly good money. I had to have it. I'd earned it. Why shouldn't he pay? .

We had stew that night and stew always tastes better to me after it's been cooked a long time. This had just been thrown together but I wasn't hungry and the meat wasn't too tough. I was thinking of Foster going up there to see Lucy, feeling that he must be getting something

from her, and that didn't make me happy. I didn't know any reason why it should have made me unhappy. I hadn't been seeing her and she was free to do as she pleased. Maybe she wasn't a nice girl after all. Lots of girls fly all apart once they've learned that a bed isn't merely a place to sleep.

"There's a dance at the town hall," Collins said to his wife. "That's tonight."

"Gee, I can hardly wait to get there."

He turned to stare at her.

"Say, what's the matter with you?" His voice was almost a shout. "You meet people there, don't you?"

"Yes, and what do I know about farming?"

"To hell with farming. Talk with the other women."

She pushed her chair back from the table. Her eyes sought my face, hung for an instant and then drifted away.

"You never let me dance," she complained.

He threw his knife and fork on the plate.

"You know why not? Well, I'll tell you why not. Those men are married but they haven't seen anybody like you before. While I'm going over things with the fellows, how they can save here and there, one of those men is going to try and get out into the back seat of a car." He mouthed a curse. "Ain't no man about to get what I can't have."

Her eyes met mine again, very frankly this time, and I knew, feeling excitement, that there hadn't been anybody since me. He slept with her but that was all. It explained some of his drinking during the day. She was driving him crazy with her body and then she was refusing him.

"We could take Bert with us," she suggested. "Bert could dance with me."

"Bert hasn't been earning the price of a bus ticket out of town."

"What's that got to do with it?"

Collins swung his head toward me.

"Get out there on that ladder," he said. "Make up for what you didn't do during the day."

I didn't say anything as I left the kitchen. I couldn't argue with him. I hadn't done much and it showed. I'd had a lot of trouble with the bull and a cow but that

didn't count with Collins. He didn't figure a thing like that or any number of other things.

Art Weber, who hadn't spoken during the meal, followed me outside. It wasn't unusual for Weber not to talk while he was eating. In fact he didn't talk much at all any more.

"Anything I can do?" he asked me as we walked over to the barn.

"No, thanks. He only bought two brushes and the one is worn out. I told him I needed a new one but he said I'd done it on purpose. How stupid can you get? He didn't pay much for the ones he got and the bristles keep coming out. When I was working on the house, using white, I had to stop and pick them out of the paint."

Weber stood around as I got my bucket and things together. We were getting the dew earlier in the evening and I wouldn't have to work for long. It was just the idea that annoyed me, that plus the fact that anything I did shortened my stay at the farm. A week before I had wanted to leave. Now I didn't—not unless his wife was with me. Taking Lucy along had been a good idea but after that day in the barn there was only one woman I wanted. Wanted bad. Wanted all the way through.

"I'm worried," Weber said.

I had some painting to do down low, where I didn't need the ladder, and I decided to do that first.

"You have to live with what you've done," I said and began splashing the paint onto the siding.

"My wife knows. It upset her but she's forgiven me."

"Collins won't."

"Anyway Norma has stopped being so sick all the time."

She had.

"It may come back," I warned him. "It did with my first wife. And Norma is going to show pretty soon. The old man will see it."

"You could do a lot for us," Weber said. "You could do what Norma asked you."

"I'm still thinking about it," I lied.

"There are things she knows."

I knew what he was talking about. Norma hadn't let me forget it. Since her sickness had stopped she hadn't pestered me so much but the threat was still there, con-

stant, terrible. If she went to her father about that Saturday morning, when Sharon could have been in any room except mine, she didn't have proof. All she had to do was put a match to his fuse and he'd blow up. For my own part I didn't care what she did but I didn't want anything to be taken away from Sharon.

"It's your responsibility," I reminded Weber.

"How can I accept it?"

"I don't know but you found it easy enough to sleep with her. You gave her the kid. A man who does that should see the girl through."

He rolled a cigarette. Since he'd been sending more money home he wasn't able to afford the regular brands. Once in a while he "borrowed" one from Foster or me. I guess he was trying to make up for what he had done by giving his wife almost all the money he earned but he was wrong in that. He'd never be able to make it up with money. Money just doesn't buy a thing like that. What he should do was take care of Norma as best he could and then go back to his family. It would take him years to live down his mistake, and maybe he never would, but the least he could do was try.

"My wife is a good woman, Bert."

"She must be."

"She even said she'd bring up the baby like it was one of her own."

"Then she's one in a million."

"But I couldn't let her do that. We'd never get away from this if she did, never forget, and then, too, Norma wants the baby. She says it may not be legal but that it'll be the only thing that's ever belonged to her."

"She ought to think of the kid. My parents weren't married and it followed me for years. Sure, some of the homes were okay but it took me a long time to get to believe that I had been meant to be born, that I wasn't just a foolish error on the part of my mother and father. Norma should consider that. The kid gets blamed and the kid had nothing to do with it."

I knew I had made him uncomfortable and he started to walk away.

"Think it over," he said.

"Of course."

I was still on the ground when Collins and his wife

came out to the car. She had on a dress, a yellow thing that she must have had to fight her way into, and he hadn't shaved. He shouted at me to put some energy into my work as they drove off and I swore softly. They'd go up to the hall and although there wasn't supposed to be any liquor taken inside he'd have a bottle anyway. If somebody else had a bottle he'd probably save his own and drink what he could steal. Nobody liked him but when these farmers got to drinking they didn't think of that. He had more angles than a politician and most of them were willing to listen. All of them were dairy farmers and while they had made money in the past they weren't getting rich at the present time. Cows cost a great deal, the price of feed was high and they didn't know until a month after they'd delivered their milk to market what they were going to be paid for it.

I finished up what I was doing and started up the ladder. I went up with confidence and I wasn't afraid. I had no cause to be afraid. I'd checked the ladder before I'd started using it, just as I mentioned before, and climbing didn't bother me. It had at first, for a day or so, but I had gotten over that. You only get nervous on a ladder when you think about what might happen.

When I was almost to the top, or as close to the top as I had to go to reach up under the eaves, I heard the rung snap like a pistol shot and I felt myself going. First my one leg went through and since I had been stepping up, all of my weight on that one rung, the other one followed. I dropped the bucket of paint and brush, as anybody would, but in that second I only had a chance to grab for safety with one hand. I dropped into the opening, caught the upper rung with that one hand, and felt the jolt of my weight as I jerked to a stop. Pain shot from my shoulder down into my arm and for an instant I thought I was going all the way. Then I managed to twist my body, using my other hand, and I caught the rung beneath the one that had broken. Cold sweat covered my forehead as I swung around the ladder and found secure footing.

The pain in my arm was terrible, pain that numbed every nerve and muscle, but during that instant I didn't pay a great deal of attention to it. I was looking at the rung that had given way. It had been sawed almost

through. Somebody had wanted me to break my neck.

I came down off the ladder and I didn't pick up the can or the brush. I walked toward the road. Now I was more aware of the pain and I tried moving my arm. It was difficult and I felt the tears burn my eyes as I did so. I couldn't tell whether or not it was broken and there was no transportation to a doctor in town. Calling one would have been an expense that Collins wouldn't have tolerated. The only one I knew who had a car was Lucy and since she was a nurse she might be able to tell about my arm without me seeing a doctor. Of course there was the truck on the farm but Collins always kept the keys with him at night so that was out.

As I moved up the road I wondered who could have set a trap like that. Almost anybody could have done it. I had gone up to my room before supper, washing and thinking that I was done for the day, and a saw would have cut that notch in a matter of seconds.

Collins?

Maybe. Maybe he knew or suspected what I had enjoyed with his wife. Such a plan would be typical of him. I was too big for him to take on as a man, fists against fists, and if I had killed myself falling from the ladder it would have been called an accident.

Hate . . .

It came back again, boiling, intense, violent. Yet I didn't know that it had been Collins. I was only guessing. Yet nobody else could possibly have a reason. Yes, it had to be Collins.

Hate . . .

Well, I'd get him. I didn't know how or when but I'd get him. I'd get him and I'd get his wife. Then the cold sweat surged out onto my forehead again. What, I asked myself, was I thinking about? Certainly something that had never entered my head before, regardless of how much I disliked a person. When I hadn't gotten along with people in the past I had left them and forgotten about them. I didn't want to hate anybody. I didn't even hate my former wife. But with Collins—well, it was a horrible feeling. Once more I wanted to spill his blood, to crush him, to leave him smashed and take away the beautiful creature he had bought with his money.

I almost walked past Lucy's house. I almost kept on going, thinking of the highway and getting out of there. But I couldn't leave without Sharon Collins. She had to be with me when I pulled out of the farm, had to share some cheap hotel room with me, had to give of her body as she had given before.

Lucy's car was parked on the grass but I didn't see anything of Foster's Ford. Maybe, I thought, she wasn't home. Maybe they had gone out together.

But she was home.

"Bert," she said as she opened the screen door. Instantly worry flooded her eyes, turning them into a darker shade of blue. "Bert, your face is so white!"

"I had an—accident."

She sucked in her breath.

"Accident? How bad?"

"I don't know."

She stepped back to let me in and I could tell that she hadn't been expecting anybody. She wore the beach robe but it wasn't tied in the middle. The robe hung loosely upon her, parting some down the middle. She was naked beneath it, the dark center of her navel pulled it at the stomach.

"Tell me what happened."

I sat on one of the kitchen chairs and I told her as she went over my arm, first removing my paint splattered T shirt. Sometimes she moved the arm herself and sometimes she made me move it. No matter what I did with the thing it hurt but most of the numbness had left my hand.

"At least it's your left arm," she said.

"Yeah, that's a help."

"And it isn't broken. You've strained the muscles and it's going to be painful for a week or more. Actually, you shouldn't work for a few days."

"Fat chance I've got of getting that much time off."

She didn't ask me if I wanted any beer but she got two cans from the refrigerator. She opened them, emptied the contents into glasses and sat down opposite me at the table. The robe was almost all the way open now, the hollow between her breasts warm and deep, the swells that lifted on either side of the hollow plainly visible.

"You hadn't ought to go back there," she said.

"I want to find out who did this."

"Is it important?" The worry had gone from her eyes but there was something else in them.

"It is to me."

"Even if they bury you for it?"

"Nobody is going to bury me."

She lit a cigarette and made an attempt to blow a smoke ring. She couldn't.

"You're a fool, Bert."

I finished my beer and got two more cans from the refrigerator. The arm troubled me as I opened them.

"I thought Foster would be here," I said, changing the subject. I looked down inside her robe as I filled her glass. "He's been running after you hot and heavy."

"I'm not seeing him again." Her eyes followed my movements as I sat down, working the fingers of my left hand.

"He didn't talk that way at supper tonight. He gave Collins some lip about it."

She lifted her head, looking up at the ceiling. It was getting dark in the kitchen but I could still see the beautiful lines of her neck. No cords or veins. Just smooth lines dropping down to her shoulders.

"Let's not discuss him," she said, lowering her head. "He just likes to argue and he knew, whatever he told Collins, that I don't want to have anything more to do with him. He was nice in the beginning but then he tried to take from me what I didn't want to give. So he's back with your old wife. I'm sure he won't be disappointed," she added.

"Probably not. Few men ever have been. The only time she thought of saying no she wasn't asked."

I fumbled for a cigarette but I had difficulty striking the match. She leaned across the table to light it for me and I didn't taste the smoke I tasted something else. Woman. The robe dropped away from her breasts and they were right there for me to look at.

A nice girl.

And it wouldn't be proper.

But I couldn't help feeling the way I did. There was just the table between us and she had been willing before. She had been upset the last time I'd left her—

or hadn't she?—but maybe she had gotten over that. She had learned what it was to be a woman and there was only one way for her to continue being one.

A nice girl.

I walked through the darkness of the kitchen and got more beer from the refrigerator. The light didn't go on inside and I almost knocked a bottle of milk onto the floor. She said something about not wanting another one but I didn't listen to her. I thought of Sharon at the dance and being miserable, of myself and wanting her. But mostly I thought of the girl who was near me, of the animal need to know her again, to thrill to the pleasures of her body.

"Turn on the light," she said.

"No. I like it this way."

I pulled my chair around the table and sat close to her. The darkness was almost complete now and it was difficult for us to find our drinks. I could hear her breathing, felt the urgency crawling into my blood. Like some of the others, I thought. Because she was there. Because I had to have her.

I fought with my bad arm to get it around her shoulders but I finally made it. I felt her stiffen, her breath coming rapidly, and as my hand pulled the robe aside she let out a little sob.

"Don't," she said softly. "Don't, Bert."

But even as she said it she leaned against me, making it easier for me, letting my hand fill itself with her. Her breast rose and fell, pushing at the palm of my hand.

"Don't," she said again.

I kissed her on the neck.

"Why fight it?" I demanded, almost harshly.

She put one of her hands over mine.

"You can come to me after being with her?" She was hurt.

"I haven't been with her." I hadn't, not since that day in the barn.

"Don't lie to me, Bert."

I kissed her on the mouth. She was undecided for a moment and then she returned the kiss. Her other hand stroked the side of my face.

"Bert, I'll go away with you," she said. "We're both licked out here."

"I can't go now."

She removed her lips from my mouth.

"Because of her?"

"There are things I have to know. I didn't almost tumble off that ladder for nothing."

"It isn't worth it."

"I don't know."

"Bert—"

"Please," I said as my other hand found her.

"Bert." She was close to crying. "Bert, I love you. No matter what you've done I love you. I can't tell you why. I just do."

"Then whatever we do is all right."

"Not if you don't love me, too."

I didn't think I could carry her with my sore arm but she didn't object as I got her off the chair and led her into the living room. She fell upon the davenport with me, begging me all the time not to go back to the farm, to stay with her, to make it decent and legal between us, to plan the best we could with what we had.

The robe was open all the way, her body there waiting to belong to me, the darkness of the night and the walls of the room echoing her pleas and sobs.

It's a funny thing but I left her that way.

I just couldn't touch her.

I wanted her and I couldn't touch her.

She was too nice a girl to be cheated.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Nobody could understand my accident on the ladder the night before and Collins blamed me for it.

"You know I carry insurance," he said. "What were you trying to do? Collect a fat sum of money?"

"Don't be silly. I'm not that much of a jerk. I could have died." We were at the breakfast table and I looked across at him. "But I could use a few days off to rest the arm. I can hardly move the thing."

"How many hands do you paint with?"

"One but there's the ladder to be moved and—"

"All right, you use one. So you work. You can slide the ladder along."

"You should report it to your insurance company."

I thought he was going to spit the bacon and eggs out of his mouth.

"What? And have my rate go up? To hell with you. You ain't going to die over a little thing like that."

"Just the same."

"Shut up and do as you're told. I'm not running any charity around here."

I continued eating and I said nothing more. Foster hadn't shown up for the milking and Collins was in a bad mood over that. But, then, he was always in a bad mood, excuse or not. I wished that Sharon was at the table but she hadn't come down yet. Breakfast was the only meal that she didn't get and she didn't do that because she claimed she had never been able to fix bacon. One morning she had tried it and she'd burned the stuff to a crisp.

"That baler doesn't seem to be working right," Weber said, breaking his silence at meals which had existed for several days.

Collins cursed.

"You ruin that and I'll run through the cutting bar on the mower," he said. "There's supposed to be a guarantee on the machine but with the deal I pulled on them they wouldn't live up to it."

"Maybe it needs an adjustment. The wire keeps snapping."

"Leave it alone, Weber. I'll adjust whatever has to be done. I don't want any idiot costing me money."

"Then I'd see to it this morning."

"Don't tell me what to do."

The rest of the meal was almost all right but Norma got sick again. She hung over the sink, shaking, the water running.

"By the hell," Collins roared. "By the hell, I'm taking you to a doctor. You ain't no good this way."

She shut off the water and turned around, gulping for air. She clung to the edge of the sink, her breasts heaving.

"Pa, I don't want any doctor." She looked awful. "Pa, I told you that."

"Then stop throwing up."

"Pa, I'm trying. You think I want to be sick?"

He rose to his feet.

"Must be something wrong with your insides," he said. "Just like your old lady used to be—no beef to you."

If her face had looked awful before it was wildly desperate now.

"It must be the heat," she said lamely.

"Heat? The heat don't bother me none."

Her eyes flashed.

"Why should it? You spend your afternoons up here with a bottle. Or you sit in the shade, doing the same thing."

He lumbered over to her.

"I ought to slap your stinking face," he said, pulling one hand back.

"Pa, don't."

"That's what I should do."

"Please, Pa. Don't I didn't mean nothing by it."

"So stop saying what you don't mean." He lowered his hand. "And get over being sick. I've got no time for that." He swung on me. "You, Forbes. Hit the ladder, fellow, and show me a day's work."

I wasn't finished with my breakfast, wanting another cup of coffee, but that didn't matter to him. I left the kitchen, moving my arm and feeling the pain. The pain had now pushed down into my back and I looked at the ladder leaning against the barn with a sense of disgust.

Foster was just parking his car.

"Collins is flipping over you," I said to him as he got out of the car.

Foster grinned.

"Let him flip. I hope when he does that he lands on his head. Do him some good, huh?" His grin widened. "You're a sucker, Bert, and you don't know what you're missing. That ex-wife of yours woke me up this morning, asking for what she wanted."

I didn't want to talk about it.

"Did you have anything to do with the ladder?" I inquired. "Somebody sawed into a rung."

He put his back to me.

"What would I want with your ladder? When I feel

like climbing I'll climb something else besides a ladder. That's for the birds. Give me a dame, and a bed to climb into and I'm in business." He laughed. "Business was a terror last night."

I walked away from him and up to the barn. He could have her if he felt that way about her. Perhaps they were a good pair. I just knew she was nothing to me, that, in fact, she never had been. The whole marriage had only been window dressing and hardly more.

The brush was right where I had dropped it and I had to clean the dirt out of the thing. It had also hardened and it took me a while before I could get the bristles soft. As for the paint I had to open up another can. Most stores have a machine that shakes up the paint for you, mixing it, but I had to do it by hand.

I moved the ladder a few feet, then stood there for a second and held my left arm. I guess you don't miss an arm until it's almost useless. That also made it rough to climb the ladder and I checked each rung on the way up. I'd laid awake the night before, trying to figure out why anybody would do a thing like that. I hadn't been able to pick out any name except that of Flint Collins. Still, that didn't add up either. If he knew about my relationship with his wife and he didn't want me around all he had to do was fire me. And they hadn't been fighting when they had returned from the dance. He'd been coaxing her for what he hadn't been getting and she'd been telling him no. Whatever else they had said I hadn't heard. However, he had gone out to the barn and I hadn't been awake when he'd come in.

There was a cow due at eleven, one that had been scheduled previously, and I took care of that detail. Handling the bull was harder on me than moving the ladder, or climbing it. My left arm was about as good as no arm at all, and the bull almost got the better of me. As I brought the bull back to his pen I noticed the empty liquor bottles on the floor. It was getting so you could count the days by the number of bottles, one for each day. I was curious, as I had been, about why Collins kept coming out there at night.

I got my answer to that later in the day.

I was working down low, trying to stay off the ladder as much as I could, when Collins came over from the

house. He didn't have a bottle with him but he'd been drinking. For the first time since I'd known him he seemed almost human—in the beginning.

"How come you stop here at the barn every night?" I wanted to know.

"Can't I? It's my barn, isn't it?"

"As far as I know."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, sure, it's your barn."

Collins leaned up against fresh paint, then swore when he got some of it onto his clothes.

"It's the bull," he said. "I look at the bull and think of myself — big, strong, nobody to stop us from what we want to do. He's an animal and I'm a man but we've got a lot in common. If he was a man we'd be the same, blasting the guts out of this world and wading through them."

It rang true. People sometimes get that way about dogs or other animals. They seem to look at the animal and see something that the animal has that they haven't got. I suppose there's a name for it. I wouldn't know. I've never been that close to the four-legged creatures, not in my feelings anyway.

"They're bringing up hay this afternoon," he said. "You knock off when they get here and work upstairs."

"With this arm?"

His attitude changed right away.

"You do like I say, Forbes. You want I should write you a letter about it?"

He stormed off and I tried to nail up some of the siding. I couldn't reach very high and do it. That is, I could reach but the pain was so fierce that I couldn't stand it.

They were late arriving with the load and I went upstairs with Norma. I could smell the woman sweat on her and her steps were heavy, leaden.

"I could lose my baby this way," she said.

"Yes, I guess that's possible."

We worked together and I tried to make it simple for her. I did all of the lifting and she just slid the bales across the smooth floor. That shouldn't damage her any but I paid a price in agony for what I did.

Weber and Foster drove down to the fields after un-

loading but Norma didn't. She sat down on a bale of hay while I stood there looking down at her.

"I've got to do something," she said. "Soon."

"Yeah."

"I was sick again down in the fields. It was a lucky thing that my father wasn't around. He's serious about getting me to a doctor."

"I believe he is."

She pulled her halter up into place.

"Are you still thinking over what I asked you to do Bert?"

"Every minute," I lied.

"If he knew about that Saturday morning and Sharon he'd kill you."

"Somebody already tried that."

"Yes, I know."

"Have you got any thoughts on it?"

"Not a one."

"It could have been him," I ventured.

She got up from the bale of hay.

"It could have been anybody," she said.

I followed her downstairs and outside and did a little more work. She was still pressing the issue, now that her sickness had returned, and it had me flat against the wall. Perhaps I should have gone away with Lucy. Yet it wouldn't have been fair to her, not when I considered how I felt about Sharon. There would be the strange towns, the rented rooms, the jobs that were either excellent or terrible and the love that came at night, a love that, for me, would only be the love of the flesh. We would say that we would be careful but then we would get careless and she would swell with child. She would love me but I wouldn't love her, only in that one way, and I couldn't do that to a decent girl. She was enough woman to buy better than that for herself.

At five I quit for the day, put the junk away, and went to my room. Collins and his wife were fighting in their own bedroom. The door was closed and I only heard him say that he'd go out and get what he wanted as I walked down to the bath. She laughed, taunting him, and he shouted curses. I smiled and entered the bathroom. She was his wife in name only.

Supper was a dreary affair. Collins was drunk, only

messing with his food, and Weber stared at Norma like she was dying. I suppose she was, inside. Dying inside and the baby growing inside. I couldn't eat.

"What's the matter?" Sharon asked me. "Don't you like what I fixed, Bert?"

"Your arm? Collins laughed at me. "It should have been your back."

I gave him a hard look.

"Somebody wanted it to be more than that?" I pushed my plate aside. "How's my credit at the bar these nights?"

"What credit?"

"That's what I'm wondering."

"It's down to zero." He glanced at Norma. "Tonight I'll be a big shot. Give him a can of beer. One. No more."

"Thanks just the same," I said, getting up. "I don't want it."

He ignored me and turned to his wife.

"It's your last chance," he told her. "Either we live the way I say or I look around."

She laughed in his face.

"Look around. See if you can find somebody better."

Upstairs in my room I didn't know what to do with myself. There wasn't anything to do. I was getting low on cigarettes and I couldn't get a drink on my own. I thought of going up to see Lucy but I knew that I shouldn't. Once a man has led a girl as far as I had led her and then backed out there's no point of going back.

A car went out and I stepped to the window. It was Collins, alone. He must have been furious because the wheels of the car threw dirt all over. I continued to stand at the window, watching. A few minutes later Norma left the house and walked toward the garage. That killed it for me going over to talk to Weber but it was a small loss. I was as tired of his problems as I was of my own.

I looked at the ladder leaning against the barn.

Somebody had sawed that rung.

Somebody . . .

But who?

And why?

Collins over what I had done with his wife? It seemed less probable in the cold light of reasoning. He was no good but had he known of it he would have come to me. I felt that much. He wouldn't be able to control his

temper that much. His revenge would have to be sudden and violent.

The door opened behind me. My body jerked like it had jerked on the ladder, injury just a matter of space, but I didn't react that way for the same reason. She was coming into the room, closing the door, and we were alone in the house.

"Bert," she said huskily.

I searched for a cigarette. I didn't have one on me.

"You're crazy," I told her, glad that she was, the power of lust ripping through me.

"He's out."

"Yes, I know."

"To get what I won't give him."

"If he can find it."

"I don't care whether he does or not. He'll come back."

I swung around from the window, my throat dry. She had changed into a shortie nightgown, her legs spread apart, her feet bare, the pink and white material revealing much and hiding little. Her lips were full and generous, curving in a smile, the lift of her breasts bringing out the wild starvation for her that I felt.

"And the girl is with Weber," I said.

"Yes, the fool."

"Maybe we're fools, too."

"Maybe but it's fun, isn't it?"

She crossed to the bed and sat down. Her lower thighs curved over the edge of the mattress. I thought of the nights that I had longed for her, of the misery I felt after waking up from a dream that I'd had about her, dreams in which she had been mine more times than I could count.

"How much more of this can you take?" I asked her, now thinking about the road that led to the construction jobs, jobs that paid fairly good and let you have some of the things that you wanted.

"I can take more than he can, Bert."

"In what way?"

She played with the bottom of the shortie, lifting it, but she didn't take the thing off just then.

"I told you he bought me."

"All right. I didn't like that. "Yeah, you said he did."

She laughed.

"I'm like a new cow. He has to pay to get full title." The shorties moved up higher. "Why shouldn't he?" She paused. "I want half of everything he's got in my name." She laughed again. "Don't you think I'm worth it?"

I shook my head.

"He'll never do that, Sharon. You've seen how he is."

"Over money?"

"That and other things."

She brought the shortie up a little more. I glanced away from her, unable to think, unwilling to talk.

"Yes, Bert, I've seen him. More than you have. I've seen him when I close the door to our room and I undress. I see him anxious and helpless and then I tell him where he can go. If he wants me he keeps his word. And he'll want me. He'll want me until he'll be ready to sell his soul for a dime."

This time when I looked at her the shortie was gone, lying upon the floor. My lungs burned and my veins were express trains for pumping, pounding blood. She knew what she was doing to me and she smiled, waiting there on the bed, the promise of her body pushing me so near to the cliff of fury that I fell over it.

"You've got to help me," she said as I began to strip out of my clothes.

I tore at my shoes, finally pulled them off without untying them.

"Anything," I assured her.

"What does that mean?"

"Anything you name." Sweat, burning sweat, poured into my eyes as I looked at her. "Anything."

She smiled sensually and lay back on the bed.

"It might be a lot, Bert."

"I don't care what it is."

She stirred on the bed.

"Anything, Bert?"

"Hell, I told you, didn't I?"

And then there was just two of us in the house, two of us in the room, two people, man and woman, to whom passion was a wonderful thing, a tool of the flesh. The flesh yielded, hers and mine, and when we crossed over the mountain of need we plunged into space, our bodies one and the same.

Later, she left me and I stretched out on the bed.
Yes, I would do anything for her.
Anything short of murder.
And — well, maybe even that.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The next rainy day Collins couldn't find anything for us to do. He was as mad as the bull out in the barn but instead of pawing at the floor he shouted at breakfast that the whole world was against him.

"Five acres down and this rotten rain," he said to nobody in particular. Then he directed his attention at Clem Foster. "I told you to mow but not so fast. Or maybe the others are lazy and they just didn't keep up with you. How about that, Weber? And, Foster, that Martin girl set you up to this? Sounds like her."

"You must be crazy," Foster said. "I haven't even seen her. What would she have to do with the rain anyway?" Collins didn't answer that.

"I'm going to put it to her," he said. He still had a hangover from the night before. "I'll get her farm and I won't pay a nickel."

Sharon had come down for breakfast but I avoided looking at her. I knew what she was like, all soft and lovely, and it just made it worse. At night I lived in hell. I wanted her to come to me and there was no way for her to do it.

"Guess I'll go to the county seat," Collins said at last, the weather apparently forgotten. He spoke to his wife. "You coming with me, honey?"

Now I looked at her. I didn't want her to go and I hoped that my eyes said as much. She smiled and yawned.

"I'd rather not," she said. "There's work for me to do here." She reached over and patted his arm. "And if you do like you promised me you know where I'll be."

"I keep my promises."

"So do I."

He got up from the table.

"You'd better," he warned her. "Ain't nothing I hate worse than a liar."

I didn't know why he should feel that way about it. He lied himself and there wasn't hardly a trick he hadn't used on some unfortunate. Maybe he was rich but half of his money must have been dirty.

He left the house shortly after breakfast, gassed up the Pontiac at the pump — it was cheaper that way because he bought the gasoline at a reduced rate — and Weber walked over to his room. It was the first day we'd had off in quite a while and I wondered what he'd do with himself.

"This is going to be a ball," Foster said to me. "You guys do the milking tonight, huh?"

"I don't care," I said.

He slapped me on the back, careful not to hit my lame shoulder.

"I'm getting your wife out of that crummy diner for a fling. She thought she had fun before this but wait until tomorrow morning."

He plunged out into the rain, racing for his Ford, and I had another cup of coffee. My arm was lame but getting better. I'd asked Collins to get a heating pad for me but of course he had refused. It didn't matter to him if the arm fell off.

"I'll make the beds," Sharon said, starting out of the kitchen. "You wash the dishes, Norma. Do you mind?"

Norma didn't say anything and she began clearing the table. When Sharon's feet sounded on the stairs, going up, Norma sat down.

"That girl is no good," Norma said.

I had some of the coffee. I'd emptied the pot and there were a few grounds in it.

"Don't get me into your troubles," I told her.

Her gaze was frank.

"You've been seeing her, haven't you, Bert? And not just that one night."

"Do I stick my nose into your business?"

"Well, it is my business. She doesn't love him and she isn't a wife to him. You can tell that by the way they fight. And he drinks more than he ever did. It's her fault. She's a slut and he's stuck with her."

"At least she's married," I pointed out. "When she sleeps with him it's legal. What's it for you with Weber?"

That hurt her and she bit down on her lower lip. Just the previous day, getting me down off the ladder, she'd been pushing the marriage idea at me again and I knew that I couldn't dodge it forever. Naturally I didn't intend to marry her. I just wanted to take Sharon and get away from the farm. It wasn't important where we went but leaving there was important. I'd checked the ladder every day and while nothing further had been done to it I didn't know how much longer my luck would last. People who try to get you once will try again.

"You take a long time to think things over," she said.

"There's a lot to consider." I put my cup aside. "For you it's simple but you don't realize what you're asking me to do."

"You can get a divorce if you want. You don't even have to wait until the baby is born. Just make me decent and give the baby your name."

I got up from the table.

"I'll help you with the dishes," I said. "And as for a divorce I've been through one before. In spite of what you may feel it isn't a pleasant experience. Somebody always gets it in the neck."

She washed the dishes and I dried them, stacking the plates and other things in the cabinet to the right of the sink. She didn't talk but I knew that she was thinking. Mornings she had been getting breakfast and going to the fields early but that had been to hide her sickness. Nobody had to tell her that she could go on that way and not have her father look into it. I don't believe it was because Collins loved her. He only wanted her to work.

"I'm going out," she said when we were done. She gave me a long, searching look. "It'll make you happy to be alone in the house with her."

She took an umbrella from a hook and walked outside. I watched her from the window. She was on her way to see Weber and probably they'd talk some more, feeling sorry for each other. I hung up the towel that I'd been holding and turned from the window. I was worried. Norma knew or guessed too much and I couldn't stop her if she decided to go to her father. She might

even blame me for her condition. A girl has a terrible power over a man in that respect. Of course I hadn't been on the farm long enough to have caused her trouble but Collins wouldn't stop to think about that when rage blew hot inside of him. And there were guns in a cabinet off the living room. They were always loaded and it only takes one bullet to polish a man off. It made me shudder.

My canvass shoes didn't make any noise going up the stairs but I tried not to sneak up on her. I coughed, moving down the hall, and turned in at the bedroom she shared with Collins. She hadn't made the bed. She was just sitting on the edge of it, her smile breaking as I entered.

"I was waiting for you," she said. "I thought that little bitch wouldn't be able to stay away from Weber. What does she want from him? Hasn't he given her enough?"

I didn't answer that and she got up to drift into my arms. My left arm pained some but I pulled her in tight and hard, sort of lifting her, my mouth closing down over the lips that I craved. They were open and wet, her head twisting back and forth as she flattened out against me. She didn't stop the kiss until I started to push her to the bed.

"Not just yet," she said.

I kissed her on the forehead.

"Say, what is this?"

She pried herself loose, walked to the dresser mirror and picked up her lipstick.

"I think he's going to do it, Bert."

"Do what?"

"Put half of everything in my name. He went to town right after I got here to do it but he'd cheated the lawyer out of a fee and the lawyer wouldn't bother with him. But last night he came through. Last night he said he would."

"I didn't hear him go out to the barn," I said. "It's the only night that he hasn't."

She swung away from the mirror, laughing. Since she had been working in the house she wore dresses most of the time but she never had anything on under them.

"Maybe he liked what he saw better. After all, a bull

isn't very pretty. He sat over there in that chair and just looked at me. He didn't have any success that night he went out, the last time we were together, and a man will do almost whatever you say to get what he wants."

"And he wants you."

"Well I pleased him that first night in the house. Frankly, he's quite a man for his age."

"But not since then?"

"I think I told you I hadn't. He didn't keep his word."

I had run out of cigarettes the previous day but there was a pack on the foot of the bed. I helped myself to one, studying her shape under the dress, thinking of the road and what we could find somewhere else.

"What's it going to prove?" I asked her.

"That half is mine."

"And after that?"

She laughed again.

"Bert, you worry too much. I only take care of today and let tomorrow do as it wants."

"You'd never be able to divorce him and get the money," I said. "Once he knows he'd kill you first."

"I said you worried too much. You do."

"About us."

She stood there, running a comb through her hair. The black curls began to come alive.

"Yes," she told me. "Maybe I could worry some about that myself."

"What if you got in Norma's condition?"

"He wouldn't know. There was that one afternoon and night." She smiled. "There'll also be tonight, if he does as he should."

I walked around the room, seeing some of the things that belonged to Collins—his shoes, some socks, a pair of pants—and the hate began to flame again. I didn't want him to have her another time. I wanted her for myself, always. I wanted to work for her and love her and build the kind of a home that I'd tried to make with Emily.

"It's no good," I said and stopped in front of her. "You don't love him and he's no man for you. There's nothing to keep us here, nothing that you'll be able to get, and I'll find a job. You can get a divorce in some

other state. I'll work and pay for it."

She leaned back against the dresser.

"You said you'd do anything for me, Bert."

"I will. Sure."

"Then be patient."

"I'm trying to be patient but—"

"Only a little longer."

Outside the rain come down in torrents. Unless it cleared before afternoon the lower fields would flood and the hay that was cut would be lost.

"I don't want his money," I said, meaning it. "I don't even care about my pay. He can save it for his old age. All I want is you."

She took the cigarette from my hand and began smoking it.

"Where would we go?" she wanted to know.

"Go? There are thousands of places."

"On what?"

"There are ways," I replied stubbornly.

She turned for a moment to crush out the cigarette in an ash tray. When she faced me her eyes were moody.

"Of course there are ways. You stand alongside the road for a ride and you get odd jobs so you can eat and rent a cheap room. Haven't you had enough of that? I know I have. And it would kill our love. It would have to kill it. Maybe it would be all right for a while but soon it would die. You'd get a job—I don't doubt that—but we'd have nothing to start out on and when I got pregnant we'd think that the whole world was against us." She stepped closer to me. "Don't you see, Bert? We've got a chance here and it's the only one we'll ever have. You should want your pay and anything else you can get from him. Look how he's treated you, treated everybody. Is he human?"

"I don't know," I said but something inside told me I should have known.

"Did he care about your arm, how it hurt for you to work?"

"No."

"Or that you almost killed yourself?"

"I guess not."

"Admit it, Bert," she insisted.

"All right. He didn't care."

She pressed in against my chest, still talking.

"Bert, he doesn't care about me, only for what I can give him. I said he bought me and he did. He saw a pretty toy and he wanted to own it. He wants to own everybody and everything." She lifted my T shirt, ran her hands over my bare chest. "Bert, he has to pay for this toy. He has to pay more than he ever paid before. It doesn't matter to me how he pays and it isn't only for me that I want what I can get. I want it for us." She pulled the T shirt all the way up and kissed me on the chest. "For us, Bert. Let's not be fools."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't. My throat was tight and dry. I put one hand up to her hair, grabbing it, and forced her head back. Her face looked up at me, her eyes filled with desire, her mouth half open.

She didn't stop me from taking her to the bed this time. She was as anxious as I was, her hands fumbling as we undressed each other. Later she moaned, her body surging against mine, the crazy things that we said to each other not making sense, the only sense coming from the love that we knew.

"Don't leave me," she cried once.

I didn't.

Not until she had to go down and get supper.

I showered after that and stayed in my room. The rain had halted, the sun was coming out, bright and hot, and I was at the window when Collins drove in. He staggered a little as he left the car and I wondered how he'd been able to drive.

Sharon called me for supper and I finally dressed and went down. She had fixed some frozen meat pies and they weren't bad. Norma, who must have returned to the house earlier, tried to eat and couldn't.

"You can have a can of beer from the refrigerator," Collins said to me.

"Thanks."

"I'll take the price out of your pay."

"Then I don't want it."

"Suit yourself. Also, you don't get paid for today."

"I didn't expect that I would."

Sharon began cleaning off the table.

"How did you make out at the county seat?" she asked him. "You wouldn't tell me before."

He threw her a hard look.

"That's between us. When we get upstairs." There was a bottle on the table and he poured a drink for himself. "You don't make your private affairs public."

I didn't stay at the table very long. I didn't want to be around her when he was there, knowing that she was his wife, and all I had to do was to look at Norma and I felt cold all over. There was hardly anything that she couldn't do to me if she turned herself loose.

It was a long evening in the room. Smoking would have helped but I didn't have a cigarette and while Collins might have picked up some for me and taken it out of my pay I was too provoked at him to ask.

About eight Sharon called up to say that my former wife was on the phone, that she sounded drunk and needed money but I didn't go down to talk to Emily. If she was out with Foster the money part was up to him. Besides, I didn't have it.

I slept for a while on the bed and I'm not sure what time they came up. It was dark in the room and they were talking. I didn't have to listen to Collins for more than a second to know that he must have done away with the bottle on the kitchen table.

"I'm your husband," he was shouting. "You deny that, Sharon?"

"Don't be silly," she replied. "I know that I married you."

"Yes, and that's all you've done."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Shut up. You'll find out."

I rolled over, sitting on the bed. I don't like people who listen in on others but I had a feeling that something terrible was going to happen in that house this night. I swore and wished we were on the road, even if we had to walk or had to sleep under the trees. He was her husband and you couldn't take that away from him. As a husband he had certain rights with her, rights that he hadn't been receiving.

I got up and opened my door, glancing down the hall as I did so. They hadn't closed their door and I could hear them talking, low and calmly at first with the words not clear. Then their voices rose, driving into the hall.

"You said you would, Flint." She was angry.

"I changed my mind." He was angry, too.

"Why?"

"Because you ain't no wife to me."

"I told you how I'd be one."

"That first night was all."

"So you lied to me. You lied when I met you and you've been lying ever since. Don't you think a woman feels that?"

He cursed her.

"What do you think I feel?" he demanded. "Looking at you, wanting you, married to you?"

Their voices fell again and I guessed that he hadn't done anything about the money or the property. I scratched in the waste can and found an old cigarette butt. I tore off the burned end and lit it. I was nervous. There was nothing that I could do. For the moment he owned her and whatever I might have done would only make matters worse. Things were bad enough as they were. Or so I thought. In the short space of moments they got worse.

He was bellowing now, like the bull out in the barn, and from her screams I knew what was happening. She had chased him into the fence with that body she had and he was claiming what was legally his.

"You lousy piece," he roared. "You're going to be my woman tonight."

"Flint!"

The cigarette burned my fingers and I put it out. I was shaking all over, bending over, my hands across my guts, my sore arm filling with pain.

Hate . . .

I wanted to go down there to that room, to end his shouting and her screaming, but I knew what would happen if I did. One of us would die and I was pretty sure that it wouldn't be me. Hate. I had too much of it to control myself once I started. Hate, the searing, furious hate that bores into a man when he knows that the flesh that he loves is being violated.

My fists were had, like twin sledge hammers that could have pounded stakes into rocks. Cursing, I tried not to listen, to know what was going on in that room but I heard—and I knew. I heard the screams that died

off into sobs, the curses that were horrible, and I knew that he was taking from her all that the marriage certificate had promised him.

A few minutes afterward he came down the hall, stumbling, the sobs of a broken girl following him. I knew he was going to the barn and I wanted to follow him, to take out the price of what he had done in blood. Instead of that I went down to the room as soon as the kitchen door slammed.

She lay nude upon the bed, her torn dress upon the floor, her face streaked with tears from what she had suffered. Yet she was able to smile up at me, to offer her lips for my mouth.

"I was afraid you'd come down here," she said.

I sat upon the bed.

"I should have."

"No, Bert. I know what you would have done and it wasn't the right time for it." She took one of my hands and pressed it to her. "He lied to me and he had his fun but he's going to pay for it."

"A man has to pay for a thing like that."

"But not half of what he's got this time." She squeezed my hand with her small fingers. "All of it," she said. "I want it all."

The kitchen door slammed again, Collins coming back sooner than I had expected, and I couldn't ask her what she meant. I had to hurry to get to my room.

Following this I heard them talking for about an hour. I didn't know what they were talking about but they weren't fighting.

Finally I went to sleep.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Things didn't start out very good the next morning. Foster didn't show up for work and that put a greater burden upon Weber and myself in the barn. Of course Collins was there but he didn't do much. He was strange-

ly silent and he didn't even yell about Foster not being on the job. One glance at him and you could tell that he looked like a man who had been smashed in the face with a rock.

We went to the house for breakfast and as soon as Norma had the stuff on the table she left for the fields. She said she was going to turn over the hay where it was thick but I knew that she had to get out of there and be sick.

"I don't want anything to eat," Collins said shortly after she had gone.

He walked outside and since Sharon hadn't come down there were only two of us at the table.

"Funny the way Collins is acting," Weber said. "Any other time he would have been ready to string up Foster from the nearest tree."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Funny."

"You suppose he's changing?"

"At his age? Hardly."

The situation seemed to bother us, too, and we didn't finish our meal. Weber said he had to gas up the tractor and I made my way over to the barn. The boards were dry enough to paint but I guess I would have painted anyway. I remembered Sharon's screams of the night before, the things Collins had said to her, rotten, brutal things, and I had to get my mind off of it.

My arm was improving and I didn't have much difficulty moving the ladder. I got my paint and brush and checked the rungs as I climbed it. That sawed rung worried me. There had been a motive behind such an act and I didn't know what it was. I simply knew that my time was growing short at the farm. It couldn't work out any other way.

Weber left with the tractor and I saw Collins returning from the fields. He walked slowly, with his head down. He didn't come over to holler at me and he didn't go into the house. He found a tree with some shade and sat down under it. But he didn't stay there long. He got into his station wagon and drove off.

I thought about him as I painted—somehow I couldn't help doing that—and I came up with nothing much. Maybe the night before had changed him. Maybe he regretted his actions. I doubted it but it was possible.

With a man like Collins nothing was impossible.

It must have been an hour later when I heard the tractor coming. I couldn't understand that because the hay couldn't be brought in yet and anyway the truck was used for that purpose. I stood on the ladder, watching the tractor. Weber, I realized, wasn't losing any time. If he had driven the tractor that way in the presence of Collins the old man would have fired him before he could get off the seat. Collins wanted everything to last forever. If it didn't he thought he had been abused by the firms who made the equipment.

Weber brought the tractor up to the foot of the ladder and shut it off. He sat there for a moment, silent, his face white, just the sounds of some wrens breaking the hot, dry air.

"Weber," I said. "Weber, what's wrong with you?"

He looked off into space, like he was seeing something behind the distant trees, and I had to ask him again.

"You'd better go down to that last field we were working in," he said dully. "She's there and I—can't."

"Who's there?"

"You know. Norma."

It was the way he said it that made me start down off the ladder.

"Of course she's there." I told him. "It would be the first field that she'd work in."

He nodded.

"Yeah, but she's on the ground." His features twisted. "On the ground. Hurt."

I stepped off the ladder, put the bucket of paint and the brush out of the way, the brush on top of the bucket, and leaned against the tractor.

"How did she get hurt?" I inquired.

This time he shook his head.

"I don't know. I—I think it was her old man. Collins. There's even blood coming out of her mouth."

I reached up and pulled him off the tractor. There was no reason for it but I slapped him hard across the face. It seemed to bring him out of his fog.

"And you left her there, Weber? What kind of a man are you?"

"A scared man," he admitted. "I didn't know what to do."

I gave him a shove.

"If she's hurt that bad you'd better get in the house and call for an ambulance. I'll go down with the girl."

The shove had been a rough one and he almost fell down.

"Collins won't pay for no ambulance."

"Shut up and do as I said."

He hesitated, then walked toward the house.

"Thanks," he said. "Hell, I don't know. I just don't know."

The fastest way to get down to the field was to ride the tractor and I got up onto it. The motor barked and came to life. I swung it in a sharp curve and threw up the stones behind me.

I hadn't asked him just where she was and I had to look for her after I arrived at the field. I found her near some bushes. She was sitting up, her hands at her sides, and she wasn't bleeding from the mouth as Weber had said. Probably her cheek had been cut inside and it had stopped bleeding. Her face was swollen, as though she had been punched."

"Gee," she said as I got down beside her. "I—the pain is awful."

"We're getting an ambulance."

She almost screamed.

"No," she said.

I knelt on the grass.

"Look, Norma. You're hurt. You—can you walk?"

"No. I tried."

I wished for a cigarette.

"What happened?"

She looked away from me. I could tell she was in agony.

"Nothing."

I leaned closer to her.

"It was your old man, wasn't it?"

She gasped and trembled.

"Leave me alone, Bert."

"I won't."

I had never slapped a woman before but I slapped her just as I had slapped Weber, only not as hard.

"I want the truth," I said.

She rubbed the side of her face, then reached down

to clutch at her stomach.

"You're in pain." It wasn't a question. It was a statement.

"Terrible."

"He followed you, didn't he?"

"Maybe I should lay down."

"Go ahead."

She stretched out and her legs pulled up. Her breath came heavily.

"The baby," she said. "Nothing could have stood that."

"I'm listening. Or do you want me to belt you again?" I meant it.

"No, I've had enough of that."

"All right."

She looked so lost and lonely lying there.

"Yes, he followed me, Bert."

"Why?"

"He found out I was pregnant. Or he asked me if I was."

"How did he know?"

She stared up at the sky. Her lips were tight with the misery inside of her.

"He could have guessed. I thought he might. So I told him the truth. I said I was. He wanted to know who had done it and I wouldn't tell him."

"You could have blamed me."

Her eyes roamed over my face.

"Yes, but it wouldn't have been right. And I had asked you to do too much for me anyway. It still wouldn't have stopped me from having the baby. I talked to Art yesterday and I knew that I couldn't force you into such a thing. I was going to leave and he was going to help me if he could." She sighed. "I just wasn't fast enough." Her eyes filled with tears. "Do you really think I will lose the baby?"

"I'm no doctor. I couldn't tell you about that. It depends on what he did to you."

"Well, he hit me in the face with his fist."

"Yes, I can see that."

Pain tore at her again, drawing her legs all the way up, and then subsided.

"He called me a whore." She was crying now. "He

called me other things. And then he knocked me down. I thought he would leave me but he didn't. He started kicking me. He said he'd kill me and my bastard child. Maybe he killed the child. He almost killed me."

Hate . . .

She was nothing to me, just a girl in trouble, but the hate began eating at my whole body. A man who did a thing like that bought his way into a hell all of his own.

"I'll get the scum," I promised.

"No."

"He needs something done to him."

"No, Bert."

"He could go to jail for this."

She tried to sit up again but she was unable to do so.

"Bert," she murmured, close to passing out. "Bert, I told you but I wouldn't tell anybody else. And don't you. I fell. Let it go like that."

"Why?"

"He couldn't stop himself. He was crying afterward."

"That's no excuse."

"And Art is weak. I didn't know it but he's weak. He'd never help me, never do anything but look out for his own skin. I begged him to stay here with me only he was too scared."

"He came up to get somebody else." Why was I defending him?

"Yes, but he could have come back." Her lips continued to move but the words failed her for a moment. "Bert," she said, closing her eyes. "Bert, I feel all strange."

She fainted then and I found our jug that still had some water in it. I used my handkerchief, applying water to her forehead, but it didn't do any good. I didn't know what else I should try. I sat down and held one of her hands in mine. It didn't amount to anything but it made me feel better, sure in my own mind that she had somebody with her who cared.

Love? No, that didn't have anything to do with it. She was simply a girl who had made a mistake, who had been caught by her mistake and who had been punished beyond the limit of what was human.

"Hell," I said.

The hate for Collins got worse as I sat there. I fought

against it but the force of the hate came plunging through my brain. Then I told myself that it wasn't my business, that I had no right to interfere. That was fine for a second but it didn't stand up. Somebody had to bring that wild man down to earth. Somebody had to do it. Perhaps I was that somebody.

I don't know how long I sat there, wondering if she was going to die, but it felt like it had been hours when I saw the ambulance coming down through the field. I stood up and waved. Now she would get something that would do her more good than sympathy.

She came to, briefly, as the two men loaded her into the ambulance.

"Ride with me," she said. "Please ride with me, Bert."

Right then the painting didn't concern me.

"Okay," I promised her.

I had the driver stop at the house so I could tell Sharon where I was going. She was in the kitchen, hardly anything on, but there wasn't time to notice. Her face sobered as I told her what had happened.

"There was a phone call for you," she said. "The police in town. They've got your ex-wife in jail and they want you to see them and talk it over."

"Cripes," I said. "What next?"

She pulled my head down to kiss me on the mouth.

"You know what comes next. All we need is the time."

"All we need is to get out of this rotten hole."

"We will," she said as I walked to the door.

Foster's car was now in the yard but I doubted if it was very important whether or not he went to work. Things were shot to pieces on the farm.

We made it into Circleville in a hurry. That driver didn't play games and the siren screamed the whole distance. I got tired of hearing it.

The hospital was a small one but the staff appeared to be competent. Her first stop was the emergency room where a doctor examined her. Somehow the doctor managed to get her to talk and then he ordered her into surgery.

"I don't see how she did that falling," he said to me in the hall. "It looks more like a beating to me."

"Can't you take her word for it?"

"Maybe I'll take it but that doesn't mean I have to

believe a lie."

They needed a pint of blood for her and they typed me. It matched and I gave the pint. I asked the girl who took it if she knew Lucy Martin and she said Lucy was working on another floor.

"She's nice but she hasn't been herself lately," the nurse told me. "Of course she never liked this work too much anyway so maybe that's it."

"Maybe."

There was a waiting room and I sat on an uncomfortable chair and looked through a lot of magazines. I tried to read but I couldn't and I just looked at the pictures. I was too concerned about what was going on in the operating room. Collins was a big man and he could have ripped her apart inside. But at least I now understood the reason for his mood that morning. It had been cold and deliberate, the mood of a man who wants to destroy.

The doctor came in and sat down next to me.

"You her husband?" he wanted to know.

"I thought I made it clear to you that I wasn't."

"Well, she needed one."

"I suppose she did."

"Before. Not now. She lost the baby."

We didn't talk much after that and I left the hospital. I felt sorry for her, because she'd never see the life that she had been carrying, but perhaps it was better this way. That didn't excuse the beating Collins had given her but better since as she grew older the child, if alive, would only bring back sad memories of frustration and error. Nor did it excuse Weber or remove the sin from him. He should have had more courage.

The jail was in the city hall and that was near the center of town. I could have ignored the message Sharon had given me, perhaps I should have ignored it, but Emily was still part of my old life, like it or not, and I was in no hurry to get back to the farm. If I got there too soon—

Hate . . .

Unreasonable, terrible . . .

If Collins was dead . . .

I shook my head. That was no good. Collins dead wouldn't bring back the baby he had kicked to death

and while he had run over me all of it didn't add up to going that far.

Still . . .

Sharon wanted what he had and she had earned it the night before. A thing like that was the next door to rape, degrading, the act of a savage. How did she get what he had when he was alive?

And my wages . . .

That was wrong. No cigarettes, not even the price of a beer, nothing.

I turned a corner, sweating. I hadn't ought to think that way. Men had gotten into trouble for less. These things grew on you, ate into you, tortured your mind until only violence, complete and final, seemed to be the answer.

The city hall wasn't a large building but it was clean. As you went in there was the clerk's office on one side of a wide hall and the police headquarters on the other side. I don't know how many policemen they had but it couldn't have been many. There was just a county map on the wall, a couple of chairs and a desk.

"I was supposed to see you about my former wife," I said to the man behind the desk. He was an elderly man, his hair gray.

"What's her name?"

"Emily. The rest could be Forbes but she may be using another one."

The man nodded and leaned back in his chair.

"It's Forbes. You know what she's in for?"

"No."

"Rolling a guy."

That was a new trick for her.

"I see," I said.

"She slept with him and then took his wallet. She had it on her when we picked her up. Frankly, she needs a lawyer."

The whole thing made me want to heave.

"She can get her own," I told the man.

He studied me for a moment.

"You don't care?" he inquired.

"Not a great deal. A woman who does that has it coming to her."

"Well, that's up to you. But you could see her and

talk about it."

"What for?"

"That's also up to you."

I eventually consented to see her. Like I say, I was afraid about what I might do when I got back to the farm and for all I knew I'd never see her again. Maybe the marriage had been a flop but there had been some parts to it that had been fine.

We met in a little room and it was private. There weren't any chairs and we stood in the middle of the floor. She looked older, like she had been used by too many men too many times, but she was still able to smile.

"Welcome to the bastille," she said.

"Yeah, and you ought to be proud of yourself. First it was for nothing and then it was for money. Now you have to go and lift a guy's dough."

"You wouldn't help me. I called the farm."

"I couldn't."

"Too busy with the wife out there?"

"Shut up." I didn't know why I had seen her.

She reached inside her blouse and adjusted a strap.

"It wasn't my idea."

"Of course it wasn't. You had somebody tell you what to do."

"Clem Foster."

I didn't think that she was lying and I didn't go for that. For Foster pushing her into anything.

"You could tell me more," I said.

She tugged at the strap again.

"We needed money and we were both broke."

"So he got a guy for you?"

"Well, he knew this man. He said the man had money and that he wouldn't remember what I took. So I met the man and when he wanted to go somewhere I suggested a motel, the only one around here. But he knew the people who owned it and he couldn't go. That left us with the rooming house but the trouble is he did remember. He called the cops and they picked me up just as I was leaving for work."

"Did you tell them about Foster?"

"Why should I? I'm the one who did wrong and I'm the one who took the money. He only introduced me to

the man, said I could be had for a price." She blinked her eyes furiously. "Bert, I need a lawyer."

"You need to get straightened out."

She started to sob.

"But, Bert, it's jail!"

I swung around to leave her.

"You ought to have a lesson," I told her. "Maybe this is it."

"Bert!"

I closed the door behind me and the man at the desk looked up.

"Are you going to do anything?" he asked me.

"No. Nothing."

I left city hall and walked toward the highway. I was going to do something all right but she didn't have any place in what I planned to do. I hadn't liked Foster from the beginning, either the way he sometimes smirked or his attitude, and if he was in the barn when I got to the farm it wouldn't be necessary to use the barn cleaner on one side when I was through with him. He'd go the length of the barn and wind up in the slop. I didn't care what he knew about me and Sharon. I was too mad for that.

A ride was easy to catch and I rattled along with an old guy in an ancient truck. He said he raised pigs and he smelled like one. But it was a lift and a breeze blew inside the cab. It could have been worse.

I walked from the highway to the farm. I walked fast, burning up in the heat. All of my anger was now centered on Clem Foster and maybe it was a good thing. I could use up what I felt on him and be a little rational about Collins. I only wanted to hurt Foster, to crack his face wide open. With Collins it might go a lot further than that.

Hate . . .

Intense, mounting with every thought.

Foster's car was in the yard.

And he was in the barn. Alone, just coming down from upstairs. I didn't know why he had been up there. Bales of hay were piled on the lower floor.

"She was a bum before," I told him, the muscles in my left arm hurting as they swelled. "But you made her a bigger one."

He looked at me for a second.

"Who are you talking about?"

"The woman who used to be my wife."

That smirk crawled into his face.

"Aw, she's a bitch," he said. "We should argue about her?"

"Of course not, Foster. We simply fight to see who's the better man. That kind of stuff I don't swallow."

He tried. I'll give him credit for that. He was big and strong and he tried. He swung first and he got something in return that shook him. I never let him go down, not once. And we did travel the length of the barn. Blood spilled upon his T shirt, covered my hands. Just before we got to the door he begged me to quit. The pain in my left arm told me to quit but I didn't. I hit him again, driving him all the way outside. Then I picked him up and threw him into the wagon where the barn cleaner emptied. One of his legs hung over the side. I wiped off my hands on his pants.

Then I went in to feed the cows.

He wasn't in any shape to help me.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Things became very tense at the farm. Collins drank heavily, brooding, and I don't think he stopped at the hospital once to see Norma. Sometimes he would rave about her, curse the man who had done it and want to know who the man was. Weber started shaking when Collins got like that and I stayed away from Weber as much as I could, only talking to him in the course of work. He lacked the guts of a man and I had no use for him. Norma was being blamed for everything and it wasn't fair. It takes a man and a woman to get the woman pregnant.

Of course Norma's work was missed in the fields and Collins had to help out. That didn't stop him from drinking and he carried a bottle with him. Once in a while he yelled at me about the progress I was making

in painting the barn but I let it run off of me and said nothing. I had a good excuse for not producing too much. When he went to the fields I went to the house and he would have killed me if he had known what I was doing in there.

"I love you," Sharon would say after we had experienced the wonders of love. "You're a big fool in some ways but I love you. Hold me tight and never let me go."

Nights Collins was with her in their room, taking her upon the same bed as I had taken her during the day, and I'd lay in the darkness, hating him and being a little mad at her, too.

"It's worth it," she told me. "He's changing his will and I'll get everything. Norma can work here after she leaves the hospital but she won't have any more than a job. He's cutting her out by leaving her a dollar and it'll be ours. I'll sleep with him for that. I want it for us but we just have to wait until the papers can be drawn up."

I didn't see what the will had to do with it but I didn't argue with her. I never had time to argue, just to take from her what I had to have and then get back to the ladder.

You can be sure that I checked the ladder whenever I went up it. The beating I had given Clem Foster had made him my enemy and I didn't trust the guy. Right after I banged him around he stayed in nights and he didn't run as he had been doing. Of course the fight had been somewhat senseless because you can never satisfy the hate you have for one man by pounding another. Yet he had deserved it. He had pushed Emily deeper into the sewer and she had been doing pretty good at that on her own. She hadn't needed his help.

Collins kept going out to the barn at night, after he had enjoyed the pleasures of his wife. and she followed him. She didn't come to me but drifted out into the night. When I asked her about that she just laughed and kissed me hard. I didn't know what it was all about but I supposed that she was watching him. Don't ask me what she watched. He only stood by the pen looking at the bull, probably talking to the animal, and drank from a bottle. Every morning there was another bottle lying on the floor. It made me furious. He could drink

himself blind and I couldn't even afford a beer. Once I stole a can of beer from the refrigerator when they were both out—she always got back to their room before he did—and when he missed it the next morning there was a scene. I finally told him I'd taken it and that he could deduct it from my pay.

"A quarter," he said.

"Beer doesn't cost that much, Collins."

"No, but who pays for keeping it cold?"

"You use the refrigerator anyway, don't you?"

"What I do is of no concern of yours. I said a quarter and it's a quarter. But next time you ask or I'll charge you double."

Hate . . .

I hated him all right. I hated him when he slept with his wife and I hated him just as bad when I looked into his flushed face. There had been so many things, too many, and the hate was like a sickness that I couldn't cure.

"I'll even things with you," Foster told me outside one morning. "The day is coming when I'll square up for what you did to me."

"Help yourself," I told him. "You want to try it now or later?"

He walked away from me.

Naturally I was worried about him, about what he might do, but the worry didn't have anything to do with the physical side of it. My left arm was feeling fine and even though it hadn't I wouldn't have ducked a fight with him. It was just that he knew I had been seeing Sharon and one word about that to Collins would have blown the whole mess wide open. Still, he said nothing and I liked to think that he was afraid of what might happen to him if he did.

"You go in and get Norma from the hospital," Collins told me at breakfast one morning. "I don't want to look at the little bitch. Just tell her she can work for forty a week. And to leave me alone. Hell, I'll have to stay drunk for the rest of my life to stand her being around here. If she wasn't a good worker I wouldn't even bother with her."

He sent me in early. If a patient stayed in the hospital until after ten they had to pay for another day

and already he was screaming about the bills.

"She'll work it out," he said. "She'll work it out or I'll take her down into that field again. Next time she won't need an ambulance, which she didn't need anyway." He cursed viciously. "The damned slut, getting herself knocked up like some careless cow. What's she want to be? A breeder of bastards?"

About nine I gassed up the station wagon and drove down the lane. I didn't think she should be coming back there but I supposed she wanted it that way and I was nobody to tell her to stay away.

I had trouble at the hospital. They demanded that the bill be paid before she was released and I couldn't sign for her.

"He didn't pay for his dead wife's sickness," the girl at the desk told me. "How do we expect to get paid for this?"

It took a lot of talking but Norma said she would pay for it as she went along and she sounded sincere. They finally believed her and let her sign for herself.

I looked at her once we were in the car. Her face was thinner but other than that she appeared to be fine.

"I'm scared," she said as I started the motor.

"You don't have to go out there."

"If I don't where else can I go?"

"Your father said he'd pay you forty a week for work."

"That's forty dollars more than I was getting before."

"Okay."

"And I can save up until I can leave. Maybe I can get a job with some nice family."

I drove out of town. I thought of riding with this girl in the ambulance, of wondering whether or not she was going to live or die, and my hate for Collins shot through me. She wasn't the only one who hadn't ought to be going back to the farm. I should have stayed away from it, too, but I had to have Sharon and I was going to get her.

"The police asked me questions," Norma said.

"That's news to me."

"Because of the doctor's report but I just said I fell. They couldn't prove anything and they left me alone." She asked me for a cigarette, something that she rarely

used but I didn't have any. "Now the baby is gone. I wanted to die when I heard that but maybe it's for the best."

I took my time going up the highway. I didn't know what it would be like when we got back to the farm. Collins had said that he didn't want to look at his daughter but he couldn't avoid that. He'd also have to talk to her if she was to work for him.

"I want to thank you for what you did," Norma said.

"You're welcome. It was nothing."

"You were worried about me and Art Weber wasn't. He was only worried about himself. When I used to go over to see him he was the one who cried. I should have seen how weak he was then, when he came up with the idea of me marrying you, but I didn't. And in the beginning he said I didn't have to worry, that he'd protect me."

"Those things happen." What else could I say? They did, to lots of people all the time. "It was just a bad break, Norma."

I could feel her looking at me and when I glanced toward her she gave me a tiny smile.

"Bert, you're a fool."

"Have it your way. I'm a fool."

"You have been with Sharon. I know that Saturday wasn't the only time—or was it Friday night? It wouldn't be the only time with a woman like her."

I drove a little faster.

"Stay out of what I do," I said. "You don't know anything about what I do."

"They were good to me in the hospital, Bert."

We rode for nearly a mile in silence.

"Why shouldn't they be? They get paid enough for it."

"Lucy Martin was my day nurse."

"Oh?"

"And she was nice, even though I am a Collins. We talked a lot when she wasn't too busy. She—Bert, she's in love with you. She'd talk of other things but mostly she talked about you."

I hadn't seen Lucy since the night I'd left her naked and willing on the davenport but I won't say that I hadn't thought of her. You always remember a nice girl, always carry the feeling of guilt after you've taken

advantage of her favors. And even when I had been making love to Sharon I had sometimes thought about her. I hadn't known why and I still didn't. You have one woman in your arms, her body yours, and then the face of another female suddenly floats in front of your eyes. After that maybe you're making love to the woman who isn't there.

Collins was waiting for us in the yard when we reached the farm. He was leaning upon the handle of a rake, his red face bright in the sun. I could see that he was dressed for town.

"You came up the road too fast," he told me. "You want those tires to wear out?"

I said nothing and the girl came around the car. There was no color in her cheeks and her eyes were vacant.

"Pa, I'm sorry," she said. "Pa, you don't know how sorry I am."

I thought he was going to hit her with the rake.

"Get to work," he told her. "Down in the fields."

She looked at me and then back at him.

"Pa, they said I should take it easy for a week."

He swore and made a swipe at her with one hand. He never touched her. I caught his arm and twisted it hard, then let him go.

"Look, you tramp," he roared at her. "I don't care about that. Either get down in the fields or off the farm. And take your lunch with you. There's no time to waste coming up here to eat."

She sighed wearily.

"All right, Pa," she said and started for the house. "All right."

He turned to me after she had gone.

"Don't ever do a thing like that again," he said.

"She's just a sick girl. Give her a break."

"Sick girl? She's a pig. She wallows in bed and gets bastard kids." He threw the rake aside. "I don't like you, Forbes," he said. "I've got no use for your kind." He raised his voice. "Get on that ladder and start to paint. And don't stop. You think I pay you for your looks?"

I moved toward the ladder.

"You haven't paid me yet," I reminded him. I turned my words cold. "But don't think that you won't. This

isn't for free."

He was swearing as he got into the car and drove off. Before I went up the ladder I fooled around with a can of paint, trying to thin out the contents because he had said he wouldn't buy more, and Norma came out of the house. She didn't carry any lunch with her. Most likely she didn't feel like eating.

I didn't go up the ladder.

Five minutes later I was inside the house.

A minute after that and I was upstairs.

Sharon was in their bedroom, wearing the yellow dress that pleased me so much, and she was drinking, a bottle sitting on top of the dresser. That was something new with her. She wasn't a morning drinker but obviously both she and Collins had been into it.

"I'm celebrating," she explained without me asking. I laughed.

"Celebrating what? The departure of your loving husband?"

She poured out a drink and handed it to me.

"Don't be silly," she said. "The papers are ready and he's signing them today. I get everything except a dollar." She laughed. "Or, I mean, we get everything. You and me. Even to his lousy car. Too bad you can't wear his clothes. That would be more."

The liquor burned going down my throat but I reached for the bottle to pour another shot. She was getting what she wanted out of him. Yet it was only a will.

"When does it pay off?" I wanted to know. "Twenty years from now?"

She lifted her eyes to mine, her lips smiling.

"That's up to you, Bert."

"If anything was up to me I'd have been out of here a week ago." I stepped forward and kissed her on the mouth. "With you."

"I told you he'd pay for what he got. He's on the way to doing it."

"A guy can always change his will. He must have had one before and he's changing that. He can change this one. It's like buying a lottery ticket. Maybe you win and maybe you don't."

This time it was Sharon who kissed me. It was a long kiss, a lingering expression of fire and need.

"He can't change it if he's dead," she said simply. "When people start writing after they're in the casket this world is washed up."

I guess it should have shook me but it didn't. Probably, while using his wife, I had thought the same thing about Collins. I had even thought it when I had sat down there in the field with Norma, her figure stretched out on the ground, her life or death a matter for fate to decide.

Hate . . .

How much could you see, how much could you endure? Where did you cross the fine line of the law and leave destruction in your path? I suppose that these things vary with different people.

Murder . . .

I had another drink.

Murder . . .

You look at a beautiful woman, knowing of the price that she's paid, hating her husband in blind passion and you think that the world would be better off without him. You think of the pay that he hasn't given you, of the long hours that you were forced to work, of the can of beer that he's going to charge you for, of a girl who loses her baby under his feet—yes, you think of these things and the hate swells even more. You're drinking so you have another drink. Or three or four. You don't know. Nothing is quite real—and, yet, it's very real. It's real because she's there with you and you want her very much.

"I don't know if I could do it," I said to her. I wasn't used to liquor and I was feeling the effects.

"You told me you'd do anything."

"This isn't just anything. This is everything."

She kissed me again, took my free hand and rubbed it against her naked breasts under the dress.

"It wouldn't be your fault," she said.

"I don't know why not. You kill a man and the blame is yours. It walks with you as far as your grave."

There were buttons on the front of her dress and she unbuttoned them. I looked down, pulling the material aside, a mixture of liquor and desire throbbing in my head.

"He goes to the barn every night," she said. "You

hear him go."

"Yes."

"And he looks at the bull. He drinks and looks at the bull. It would be easy. Everybody knows that the bull is getting dangerous. Weber has said it lots of times. All you have to do is put him in the pen with the bull. That beast will do the rest. It'll be an accident. Nobody can say otherwise."

I closed the front of her dress and picked up the bottle. It was perfect, well planned, more perfect than anything I could have thought of myself. But it was murder. No matter how I looked at it it was murder.

"Let's get out of here," I said, trying once more.

"Not until we have it all. It's ours. Look how he's treated you, treated me, treated Norma."

I thought of something else just then.

"What about the note that he holds against Lucy Martin?"

She got a drink for herself.

"We'd take her place. Why not? Shouldn't we get everything that we can?"

I didn't like that but I didn't discuss it further. I could fix it so Collins would have the note on him and I could take it. If it wasn't found it was worthless. Still . . .

"Sharon," I said. "Sharon, I can't do it. Maybe the reasons are there but they aren't enough." I wished I hadn't taken any of the liquor but I was tense and I poured more into my glass. "I can't do it," I said again.

"You've only got tonight, Bert."

"Why?"

"Because somebody offered him a lot of money for the bull and he loves money more than the bull."

I didn't believe that. She was trying to force me.

"No," I said.

She pulled her dress apart and shoved herself up against me.

"Bert, it's either you or him. One of you is going to die."

I felt the warmth of her body, the fierce heat in the room.

"Why?" I wanted to know.

"Because he knows about us. I promised him I

wouldn't ever let you again."

Suddenly it got cold in the room.

"That's lousy," I said. "I can't see how he knew."

"Maybe through Clem Foster."

"Yeah, that could be," I admitted. "I shouldn't have roughed him up."

"Well, you can't take that back."

"No." I shook my head, trying to clear it. "Odd that he didn't jump me before this."

"No, it isn't. He's going to kill you."

I had a long drink that time.

"I see," I said.

"Remember the sawed rung on the ladder?"

"Yeah. I'm not forgetting that right away."

"He did it. I saw him do it but I couldn't warn you."

I walked over to the window. It sounded right. If he had known about us he would have tried a thing like that. I was too big for him to handle any other way.

Hate . . .

Hate that was complete now, hate that became a blazing red in front of my eyes. Hate that pierced my brain like a sharp needle. Hate that buried itself in the past, lived again and made everything I had to do seem right.

"Okay," I said as I turned from the window. "Tonight. Get him plastered."

Her face and eyes were bright, glowing. She began to get out of her dress.

"And give him what you want from me now?" She stood naked before me. "Let him have me just once more?"

"Cripes," I said. "Oh, cripes."

It was good for us then, the way it had been before, the way it should always be. Twice she begged me and twice I pleased her. I was a little drunk when I left the room, both from what had pleased me and the liquor.

I used the phone downstairs. I got the hospital on the wire all right but they didn't like it when I wanted to talk to a nurse who was on duty. After I said that it was an emergency they connected me with Lucy.

She was hesitant at first, very distant, but she was willing to do as I asked. When she reached home after work she would call Collins and tell him that she had

the money for the note, that she would come down that night and pay it. This would assure me that Collins would have the note on him. Once he was dead I wouldn't have any control over it and I didn't want her to lose what she had. The farm was in her blood and it was the least I could do for her. A parting gesture. A goodbye. Something decent in return for what I had known with her.

"Bert," she said, not distant now but very concerned.

"Bert, what is this all about?"

"Never mind. I'll get the note."

Greater concern crept into my ear.

"Bert, don't do anything wrong. It isn't right between us but don't get into trouble."

"You want the note, don't you?"

"Naturally."

"Well, all right. You're going to have it."

"Bert—"

"Only don't come down here."

"How could I without the money?"

"Just remember that."

I hung up and climbed the stairs to my room. Collins was just arriving from town but I didn't feel like working. Besides, I had to think. I had to think of this day and this night and what it was going to mean to us.

I lay down on the bed and closed my eyes.

I didn't want to do it.

But I had to do it.

There was no other way.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I went down for supper although I didn't feel like it. I felt terrible because of the liquor and what had to be done.

"Weber is leaving," Collins told me. "He's going back home."

"That means another man, doesn't it?"

"No. Norma can work all the harder."

Norma didn't eat. She was too tired and sick to eat. She excused herself and said she was going to bed. I had the feeling that she had talked with Weber down in the fields and that she wanted him to quit. It made sense. He belonged with his family and not there on that farm miles away from them.

Clem Foster said nothing throughout the meal and that was unusual for him.

The phone rang and Collins went to get it. He was pretty drunk which was the way I wanted him to be. I hated the guy but when that bull finished him off—or I did it because the bull wouldn't—I hoped that he wouldn't know what was happening. It's bad enough to die. Why go through the hell of those last few moments?

"I don't get it," he said as he returned to the table. "The Martin girl has the money for the note. You wouldn't think anybody would have trusted her for that kind of money." He sat down, almost falling off his chair as he did so. "Guess I won't get her place after all."

Collins ate very little but he kept drinking from a bottle. Of course he had known that I hadn't done much work that day and he came right out and told me that I wouldn't get paid. I didn't say anything. I helped myself to one of Sharon's cigarettes and our eyes met. He wasn't going to pay anybody, not ever again. The only bill he was going to pay was the one for being about the meanest man I had ever known.

I spent the evening in my room, walking back and forth, hunting for cigarette butts in the trash can and finding none. I needed a smoke or a drink or something. The sweat was cold on my forehead and my hands trembled. My legs weren't very steady either. In the short matter of hours I would become a killer.

And for what?

The answers to that were easy.

I'd have his wife and she'd have his money but there was more to it than that. All of my hate for him would die when he died and somehow I had to wipe that out of my life. He had just about murdered his own daughter, tried to cause my death on the ladder, and any man like that wasn't a human being. He belonged in the

ground.

Hate.

And love.

You sold one so that you could buy the other. You killed the husband so that you could have his wife, a woman who was more than any other woman you had ever known. You thought of running the farm, or disposing it, and you knew that her love would be good, tender and warm.

It got dark and I heard them come upstairs. He was laughing and she was asking him why he couldn't wait. My fists came together hard. Probably he had his arm around her, his hand over the tilted cone of one breast. Later, in the room, he would want her as a woman and, because he'd put in his will that she got everything, she'd have to let him. I looked at my fists. I wanted to use them, to smash him down, to stop him before he enjoyed the pleasures of her flesh. But I couldn't. I had to wait. Whatever I did had to be right.

I thought about the money that she would have but it didn't matter. Honestly, it wasn't that important. Money would make the future simple for us but we didn't have to have it. All I needed was a decent job and her body waiting for me when I returned home from work. Home could be almost anywhere. Just a room would have been all right.

The moon was out, washing the fields and the buildings in a pale glow, and I didn't like that. Complete darkness would have been better. I grunted and turned from the window. I had to be satisfied. I couldn't change the moon.

Sweat dripped from me as I lay down on the bed. In that second I didn't want to do it, not even to him. But it was too late now to turn back.

They must have been drinking in their room because I could hear them laughing now and then. With each laugh I twisted on the bed, the sweat worse than ever, my insides pushing all the way up against my backbone.

About eleven I heard her go out, her feet sounding on the stairs, the kitchen door closing behind her. I sat up, wondering. He should have gone first, the way he always did. Still, it didn't matter much.

I left the bed and stripped out of my T shirt. It was

soaked. Walking to the window I could see her going toward the barn, just a figure in the night. A beautiful figure. Mine.

I don't know how long I waited. It must have been an hour. I picked up the dirty T shirt and wiped the sweat from my chest. Something hadn't worked out the way it should have worked. Maybe he'd gotten too drunk and he couldn't make it to the barn. There was only one thing I could do. I had to take him.

After stepping into the hall I moved slowly to the door of their room, hesitated a moment and then pushed the door open.

He lay half naked and snoring upon the bed, not the kind of a snore that comes from sleep but the snore of a man who has consumed too much. I swore softly and approached him. I had wanted him drunk but not this drunk.

His pants were on the floor and I went through them. When I came to his wallet I examined it carefully. There was a lot of money in there but I didn't touch the money. I didn't find what I wanted to find.

The room smelled of man and woman and booze and I walked to the dresser. I saw it right away. The note lay on top, no doubt where he had left it when he had come upstairs. I tore the note into several small pieces and threw them into the trash. The note wasn't any good now. Nobody could do anything with it. If Sharon asked me about it afterward I'd simply say that Collins must have been so drunk that he hadn't known what he was doing, that he'd torn it up.

I had to dress him and it wasn't a simple task. He opened his eyes once and then closed them. He didn't open them again. I slugged him on the jaw too hard for that. A little blood formed at one corner of his mouth.

Hate . . .

And love . . .

I didn't know what I was doing. All reason was gone. There was the insane urgency of the moment, the lust to kill that wasn't really a part of me at all. But I wouldn't kill. The bull would do that. I was only helping the bull to accomplish his task.

"Bert!"

I turned sharply, dropping one of his shoes on the

floor, every nerve end tense.

Lucy Martin stood in the doorway.

"Get out of here," I told her savagely.

She stepped forward.

"Bert," was all she said.

"Get out of here," I repeated. "You were supposed to stay home." I waved one hand. "And you don't have to worry about the note. I took care of it."

She came over to me then. She looked down at Collins lying on the bed and then up into my face. There was tragedy in her eyes and her lower lip trembled.

"Bert, you're a fool."

"Get off my back, will you?" I didn't know how I was going to handle this now. "Go up to the place where you belong."

She slapped me across the face. It hurt but I didn't strike her. I rubbed my face and cursed.

"You'd better go upstairs in the barn," she said simply.

I didn't know what she meant by that.

"What would I be doing up there?" I said.

She cried for a moment and then stopped.

"Because they're up there," she replied.

I still didn't know what she meant but I started to shove her toward the door. She kicked me in the shin. That hurt worse than the slap.

"Let go of me, Bert!"

"No. This isn't any of your business."

"They're up there," she said again. "Bert, Sharon and Clem Foster are up there."

I let go of her then. Something inside of me died and a dozen things ripped through my brain. Foster hadn't been going out lately and she'd been leaving the house as soon as Collins stumbled to the barn.

"Well, hell," I said weakly.

Once more she was crying but she could talk.

"I knew you were going to do something awful when you called me about that note. You said not to come down and that meant it would be terrible. Even in the hospital Norma told me how she knew you were sleeping with Sharon. Clem Foster had told me about it, too, and I wondered why he hadn't gone to Collins about it. They say you beat him up and the only way I could

figure it was that he had something to gain by keeping quiet. I made up my mind to come down here tonight and find out what you were doing. I was near the barn when she came out of the house. Foster met her and I heard her say that you were going to do it tonight. I couldn't guess what she was driving at and—well, I followed them inside. I didn't make any noise, any more than I made coming into the house, and I found out what this was all about. You were to kill him, or have him killed, and they were going to take everything Collins had. Worse, you were to be blamed for it."

The thing that had died inside of me died some more, died all the way.

Hate . . .

And love . . .

These two emotions are like a fire in a gasoline drum—there has to be an explosion.

She didn't want me to go. She begged me not to go. But I had to do it. I was driven by forces greater than anything I had ever known before.

"See about Collins," I told her. "Do what you can for him."

"Bert!"

I was already going down the stairs, my shoulders lifting and falling from the surging power in them.

Hate . . .

But a different kind . . .

Hate for a body I had once loved, for a man who was no good.

I don't remember walking to the barn but I remember being careful about it, moving silently and swiftly. Once inside I crept up the stairs, thinking of what a fool I had been, of the man I had almost carried to his death. Thinking, too, of the foster homes, of wanting something for myself, of struggling through a marriage that hadn't worked.

At the top of the stairs I stopped. What was the use? What was the point.

I reached for the switch to turn on the lights but I didn't snap it right away. They were there talking and laughing but the words didn't mean anything to me. Only their laughter plunged into my guts and I thought I was going to be sick. Laughter for them—and for me.

Laughter because I had lost all sanity in the wonders of the flesh.

I thought of Lucy Martin, of Lucy who was a nice girl, a smart girl, a girl who was far smarter than I had been. She wouldn't want to have anything to do with me now. She knew what I had almost become and in the knowing her love would fade.

Laughter . . .

Well, it wouldn't take me long to pack and I could catch a car or a truck out on the highway. I couldn't ask Collins for my pay now. I had to go away broke, to find a new town, a new job, to start all over again.

Laughter . . .

They thought I would be bringing Collins over to his death but they were wrong about that. They'd never get what he had, not after this. They might have each other but they'd have the same poverty that I'd know.

The switch moved down, clicking under the pressure of my finger, and light flooded the upstairs of the barn.

They were lying upon a blanket, tight in each other's arms, their laughter now gone as they kissed.

I guess they must have known who it was as they broke apart and sat up.

"Pull your dress down," I told her. "You haven't got anything that I haven't seen before."

"Bert!"

It was like the cry of a wounded beast, of a trapped animal imprisoned by the sharp ends of a thousand spikes.

"You cheap liar," I flung at her, walking up to them, standing there and looking down. "You almost made it, didn't you?"

Foster swore and got to his feet. Of course he came at me. There wasn't anything else that he could do. The only way out was down the stairs and he had to try and prove that he was a man.

His fist smashed me in the face and I laughed at him. He had put everything he had into the blow but it took more than that to put me down. It took a great deal more.

Sharon started screaming when I went to work on him. He fell back against the piles of baled hay and she clawed at me, screaming all the time, begging me not

to hurt him. I got tired of that and I gave her a shove. She went sprawling and I leveled another one at his chin. His face was bloody now and he swung blindly, without power.

When he went down I rolled him over with my foot. He was hurt but he'd recover.

I turned to her and she broke into a run for the stairs. I caught her just before she got there, caught her by the dress and pulled hard. The dress split down the back and as I spun her around I tore it from her body.

"Bert," she said wildly. "Bert, it can be the same as it was before."

the smooth lines and the ripe curves for which I had been I looked ather, at the body I had wanted so much, at willing to kill.

"It's time for the truth," I told her.

She tried to smile.

"Don't give me that stuff. What we had was cheap and "What we had was the truth."

rotten." I grabbed one of her arms and twisted it. "The truth, Sharon. I won't settle for less."

"You're breaking my arm."

"Consider yourself lucky. I ought to break your neck."

It took me a long time but I finally got it out of her, her naked body struggling to free itself from my grip, her confession coming only when I gave her so much pain she couldn't stand it.

Yes, she had married Collins for his money, thinking that it was better than being a prostitute the rest of her life. No, she hadn't loved me, never could, but I'd had the reasons to hate and she'd led me down a one-way street. Yes, she was in love with Clem Foster, or as much in love with him as she could be with any man. No, Collins hadn't sawed the rung on the ladder. She'd done that, planting the final hate inside of me. And he hadn't known about us. That had been a lie to get me to act quickly.

"Go back to your lover," I told her at last. "I think he needs you, I don't"

I left them upstairs in the barn,thoroughly disgusted with the whole mess.

After that I went over to the house to see about the man I had almost killed.

There were some things, when he sobered up, that he ought to know.

I wondered if I could tell him.

PLEASURE GROUND

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It ought to be easier after a year but it isn't. You pay one bill and somebody else sends you another one. So you pay that and wait for the next mail.

Once in a while I go down to Lonely Acres to see Norma but I don't often have the time for that. I work alone on the farm and I never seem to get done all that I should. I try to add another cow to the herd every month or so and maybe in a few years there'll be a full barn.

Collins is dead. I went to his funeral but nobody cried over him. Not even Norma who inherited the farm. I guess all of the things he'd done were simply too much to forgive and forget. After the divorce from his wife he went all to pieces, drinking heavily, and one day when he was trying to handle the bull the animal got the best of him. That's how he died, just as he had almost died on that night which I don't care to remember. Of course the bull was shot the next day.

Sometimes people ask me about Sharon and Clem Foster but there isn't much that I know. They went away together that same night, his face bloody and the old Ford rattling. About ten miles out of town he rammed into a truck and she lost all of her beauty as she crashed through the windshield. The last I heard they were working on a farm, their dreams for having money as shattered as her face. Maybe there is a price for everything that people do.

Norma is doing well on the farm and she has a couple of nice fellows working for her. I think she may marry one of them and I hope she does. She's a nice girl and she deserves a break. Her mistake with Weber was one

that could have happened to anybody. Quite naturally, she never mentions Weber and for all I know he's back with his family.

Once in a while I hear from my former wife. She served a short sentence in the county jail and I think she learned her lesson. At least she tells me that she's doing well in Florida and that she's looking forward to a marriage that she's going to try and make decent. I wish her only the best.

It has taken a lot of work to get the farm back in shape but the effort has been worth it and I think we'll come out all right. Lucy still works at the hospital—the money she earns has come in handy—but she won't be on the job much longer.

"Don't be mad at me," she said one night.

We were lying in bed, our bodies close, the satisfaction of what we had known a few minutes before complete.

"Why should I be made at you? You're the finest wife a man could have."

Her lips found mine, lingering.

"I'm that way, Bert."

I kissed her hard.

"Honey, that's great."

And it is.

Who could ask for more?

THE END

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