

*Speed... Danger*  
**...DEATH!**

A NOVEL

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Every Book Complete

# HOT ROD

HENRY GREGOR FELSEN



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N.Y. Times

Complete and Unabridged



## **BUD CRAYNE'S MOTTO WAS:**

**"When you get in a tight spot,  
use your head and  
DRIVE YOUR WAY OUT!"**

He had the bold, relaxed assurance of one who knows the secret of success is *power*. When he got behind the wheel of his souped-up jalopy he knew he could count on his rod doing a sweet, easy 120 miles an hour. And he knew he could count on his own trigger-fast reactions to *drive* his way out of trouble. The kids idolized him, his friends envied him, and La Verne Shuler was his girl.

But Bud Crayne had enemies, too. And when he got on the wrong side of the Law he was playing right into their hands.

***"HOT ROD is so packed with suspense that to begin it is to read it, spellbound, to the end, and to have read it is never to forget its impact."***

**—New Bedford Times**



# **HOT ROD**

**by Henry Gregor Felsen**

**BANTAM BOOKS**



**NEW YORK**

## HOT ROD

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Printed in the United States of America

To  
BOB HASSETT, ESTHER  
and  
*The Des Moines Safety Council*

\*

THE PROBLEMS IN THIS BOOK  
ARE TRUE. THE CHARACTERS,  
PLACES AND ACCIDENTS ARE  
FICTIONAL. THE TEEN-AGE  
ROADEO DESCRIBED IS BASED  
ON A SIMILAR ROADEO DEvised  
BY THE DES MOINES SAFETY  
COUNCIL AND IS DESCRIBED  
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## Chapter I

BUD CRAYNE rounded a curve at fifty and faced into the setting sun. For the next ten miles the highway ran straight and level across open farm land. Ninety-nine out of a hundred drivers rounding that curve and coming on the flat immediately increased their speed. Bud held at fifty. He had his reasons for staying at fifty. Bud always had a reason for driving at a particular speed.

A new green Plymouth sedan came up fast behind Bud, honked imperiously and swept by. Bud glanced at the other driver as the Plymouth moved past and saw contempt in his eyes for the ancient-looking contraption Bud was driving. Bud watched the new car pull ahead and cut back in front of him, gaining speed and space. He estimated it was hitting seventy, and could tell it was working hard. He laughed to himself but he hated to be passed, even when he wasn't racing.

Fifty. The dual pipes were crooning throatily, the mill was turning like a charm. Bud looked in his rear-vision mirror, made sure the road ahead was clear, then swiftly checked his instrument panel. He noted and remembered the readings of a dozen quivering needles at a glance. Taking a pencil from behind his ear he jotted the readings on a pad strapped to his right leg. That was all for fifty. He stabbed the gas pedal with a gentle toe and his rod leaped to sixty. An easy, effortless sixty. A true sixty.

A short run and an instrument check at sixty. Then seventy. At seventy the dual pipes sang deeper, their rich powerful tones rolling back over the concrete road. At seventy the motor was happy, taking a full bite. Everything checked at seventy. A deeper stab sent the speedometer needle to eighty, and the RPM on the tachometer climbed.

The green Plymouth came into view. Whatever its speedometer read, it wasn't grossing more than seventy or seventy-five. Bud's figures for eighty were on the pad. He wanted ninety, and the Plymouth was in his way. He moved slightly to the left and saw that the road was clear. He gave the Plymouth the horn, waited for the new car to wobble as the driver was startled, then moved to pass. Bud didn't look over to see the other driver's reaction. He didn't care about the other driver. He was interested in making his check at ninety, and that was no speed to rubber-neck at.

As Bud started past the Plymouth the driver of the new car looked to his left to see who was passing him at this speed, expecting to see some more powerful new car. When he saw Bud's crude-looking home-made job matching wheels with him he almost ran off the road. Not willing to be passed by a car that looked as though it would fall apart at forty, the Plymouth driver tried to make a race out of it. Bud took him on.

For a minute the two cars raced down the highway side by side and only inches apart. As the Plymouth picked up speed Bud stayed with it, until he saw that it was running wide open. Then he opened up. Despite the speed at which he was traveling, he could feel his rear wheels dig the road as he gunned the motor. His car shot ahead and pulled away from the new car, gaining space with every second. The driver of the Plymouth saw it was useless to chase Bud and dropped back to a chagrined and disgusted sixty. He felt disgraced at having been out-run by Bud's stripped-down car, but he was judging from outward appearance alone.

It was a Jacob's coat of a car that Bud Crayne had built. The body had come off an old Ford coupe. Bud had sanded off the original black finish and repainted

with a dull red prime coat. Some day he intended to put on a finish coat. Bud had also chopped three inches from the top of the body, streamlined the windshield, and added fenders from another Ford.

He had installed a dropped and filled front axle and cut the frame at the rear to lower the car another three inches closer to the road. As a result, his car looked as though every spring had been broken.

The dual chrome exhaust pipes gave the first hint as to what might be found under the dull red hood. The motor had been taken from a wrecked Mercury, rebored, equipped with a three-carburetor manifold, double springing ignition, re-ground  $\frac{3}{4}$ -race camshaft, high compression head, and a score of other refinements and improvements devoted to speed and power.

In contrast to the usual greasy motors found under gleaming hoods, the nondescript body of Bud's car concealed a motor that shone like a warship's brightwork on inspection day. There was chrome wherever chrome could be used. The head, the acorn head nuts, hose connections, exhaust headers, pipes, filters, carbs and linkage system were all of chrome and spotless.

Inside the chopped stubby cab Bud sat behind a huge white steering wheel which, with the side-shifting assembly, had been taken from a Lincoln. The cab was upholstered in artificial red leather with a chrome dash and chrome instruments and knobs. The entire ensemble rode on an ancient Ford chassis with a newer Ford rear end. How all these odds and ends had been fitted together to make one car was the result of months of study, experimenting and hard work on the part of Bud Crayne. It had all been done in his spare time while working at the Avondale Garage and Service Station.

Ninety. Bud traveled the straight highway like a bullet, his pipes blatting against the hard road with the

sound of a track racer. At ninety the road seemed to shrink to the width of his wheels, and when he went over small dips in the pavement his car seemed to be dancing lightly on its toes, ready to leap into the air.

Bud leaned forward, listening intently. He didn't like the way the motor was pulling at ninety. Now that his chrome mill was being pushed, it was working too hard for the power and speed it delivered. He pushed on the gas pedal, and altho he was rewarded with more speed the response was soggy. He pushed a little harder, almost all the way, and as he touched one hundred his motor faltered. Bud held at a hundred, listening. Better to figure out the trouble now and fix it, than find out later, when every ounce counted.

At a hundred his rod had a tendency to float, and he had to fight the wheel when he ran into sudden changes in the wind. A black dot coming out of the sun swelled up to a big tractor and trailer. There was no time to cut his speed as they passed. The noise of their passing was like a grenade exploding, and the backwash from the truck hit Bud like a solid blow. His car shuddered from the impact and pulled like a balky horse fighting the bit. Bud fought it through, but he was forced to the right of the road, and for a moment it felt as though his wheels were going to slide off the pavement and ditch him. He gave it everything and played for the middle of the road. He came out rocking and cut his speed, thankful there was plenty of room and no traffic.

Bud hadn't failed to note the details of engine performance in his burst of speed. He wrote them down on the pad strapped to his leg, then put the pad in the glove compartment. He looked at his watch and saw it was time to head for Avondale and work. He yawned. It had been a fairly dull run on the highway.

Knowing how his car deceived by its looks, Bud liked

to patrol that ten mile stretch of straight road. Whenever he could, he teased big cars into racing with him, and usually won. Sometimes he won because his car was faster, but when some unusually fast stock car could approach his speed, Bud counted on his superior driving ability and his nerve to beat down the opposing driver. Most drivers quit easily at high speeds. Not Bud. He liked to win.

On this late afternoon he had gone out primarily to check the performance of his rod, and the Plymouth hadn't given him much of a race. Now that he was headed back to the garage he was ready to tear into his motor and find out where it was weak. There was only one more thing he wanted to try.

Another mile down the road Bud turned north for the two-and-a-quarter mile run into Avondale. The moment he turned off the main highway he was on the stretch of road that all the local drivers regarded as a playground.

The road to Avondale ran straight for a mile. Then it broke to the left in a long, gentle, banked turn that was known as Ninety-Mile-Curve. When the road straightened again, it lay like an arrow for a little over a mile, pointing at the small town. At the end of the flat was an overhead railroad crossing, and the highway coiled into a tight S to go under the tracks. Once around the S and through the underpass, there was Avondale. The entire one unpaved business street of it.

As usual, the Avondale road was deserted. Bud shoved his rod up to ninety by slow stages, so that when he hit Ninety-Mile-Curve he was rolling steadily. Now for the test. He had installed an anti-sway bar and canted his rear springs. That, coupled with his low center of gravity ought to allow him at least another five. He tried the turn at ninety-five.

It was easy. There was a little pull, but nothing serious.

His rod seemed to dig its nose in a furrow and come around without any serious danger of getting out of hand. His tires wailed a little from the side pull, but it was a pleasant sound. He came out of the turn holding a new record, determined to add another five when his mill was in perfect order.

Dropping back to ninety, Bud made a final test for stability. He pointed to the left side of the road, crossed the middle line, then turned back again. As soon as he was on his own side of the road he eased to the left again, and then back to the right. Rocketing, he rocked from right to left, rolling to the fine point where another touch would pull his off wheels from the road. Back and forth across the road he rolled, mightily pleased with the way he could rock and roll without losing control or rolling over. He had the touch. He knew just how much, and how far. It was a wonderful feeling. It was important to know just how far he could push his set of wheels before he made his speed run to Trenton. He thought of mistakes in judgment that would roll him over as purely mechanical problems. It never occurred to him that he might be injured or killed, or that he should be afraid.

Bud cut the gun at the Avondale sign along the highway, went into the S-turn fast, and whipped around it with power on. He burned rubber in a joyful double turn, roared up a slight incline when the turn ended, and another hundred yards on he swung to the right across the gravel approach to the Avondale Garage and Service Station. He eased past the two gas pumps and the service station building and rolled into the open garage. The run was over. Reluctantly Bud turned off the ignition and climbed out of his car, stretching his arms.

Bud Crayne was a lanky, raw-boned boy of seventeen with a long face, bold, self-confident black eyes, and a thin mouth that almost always held a challenging, reck-

less smile. He wore an old fedora hat with the brim turned up in front and fastened to the crown with a giant safety pin, a tight fitting black leather motorcycle jacket with zippers in the sides and sleeves and studded with metal buttons, and faded blue denim trousers. On his feet he wore short leather boots ornamented at the ankle with small brass chains.

Bud's parents had died when he was in grade school, and since that time he had lived with a bachelor uncle who shared furnished quarters with his young nephew. At first the housekeeper where they lived had watched over Bud, made sure he wore clean clothes and ate his meals and left for school on time. Bud's uncle didn't know much about taking care of a boy, and let the housekeeper take over. As long as Bud was well and out of trouble, his uncle didn't worry.

During his early years Bud enjoyed an unusual amount of independence. The more he could look after himself, the more he was allowed to. He stayed out late, roamed when and where he wished, and learned a hard kind of self-reliance.

He had started hanging around Jake Clymer's garage almost at once. Jake let him stay, taught him about cars, and paid him for his work. Bud's real interest in cars led him to spend more and more time at Jake's, until, in his 'teens, he knew everything about cars that Jake could teach him, plus a good deal he'd learned himself out of books and magazines.

Bud had learned to drive while most boys were still struggling with bicycles, and once given this head start behind the wheel, he never relinquished it. He had always been able to out-drive the others, and his leadership behind the wheel was seldom questioned or (any more) challenged.

At seventeen Bud was his own boss, resented any

attempts by anyone to guide or counsel (he called it interfering with) his ways, and he not only worked at Jake's, but practically lived at the garage.

Growing up in this way without a family, Bud always felt different from the other boys and girls in town, and was always a little apart from them. When they turned to the warmth and love in their homes, he, left alone, turned to the garage, and his car. The hours that others spent with mothers, fathers, sisters or brothers, Bud spent with his homemade hop-up. It was his family. He was in the habit—like cowboys who rode lonesome ranges for isolated days at a time and talked to their horses to break the silence—of talking to his car as though it were animate, and could understand, and sympathize.

His independence made him seem more mature than the other boys his age who yet had to ask parental permission to come and go. Bud regarded himself a man, and thought (he thought) like a man. He had a job, and as soon as he was graduated from high school, he was going to be Jake's partner in the garage. Content with this future which assured him an income and a chance to experiment with motors, he considered himself old enough to marry. When high school was over with, and he was working full time, he intended marrying LaVerne Shuler. Why not? He could support a wife, and, for the first time in his life, he would have a real home of his own.

Meanwhile, Bud worked for Jake in his free time. When he wasn't working he was on the road. He tinkered with his car for hours in order to have pleasant moments of speed on the highway. When he was behind the wheel, in control of his hopped-up motor, he was king of the road. When he was happy, his happiness reached its peak when he could express it in terms of speed and roaring



power, the pull of his engine, the whistle of the wind in his ears, and the glorious sensation of free flight.

When he was unhappy, discontented, moody, the wheel again offered him his answer. At these times there was solace and forgetfulness behind the wheel. The motor snarled rather than sang, speed became a lance rather than a banner, and revenge against trouble was won through the conquest of other cars that accepted his challenge to race. And when he was alone on the road, his car and its speed seemed to remove him from the troubles that plagued him while his feet had contact with the earth. Once removed from bodily contact with the ground, once in motion, once in a world of his own making, he escaped his troubles and sorrows in speed, in the true touch of the wheel, in the trustworthy thunder of the motor, the rushing sensation of detachment from all that was rooted or planted in earth.

No matter what his mood or his feeling, his trouble or his joy, it made everything right and good to be guiding his car, the car he had built, that belonged to him, that owed everything it was to him. Not a day passed without Bud's taking time for a spin. It was more than a ride; it was more than speeding; more than killing time. In some ways these daily sessions on the road were his hours of meditation, of true self-expression, the balm for his soul and the boast of his spirit. In these flying hours he had sought himself out, molded himself into what he was, and found his creed.

Bud's car, variously called his baby, hop-up, strip-down, roadster, heap, hot rod, jalopy or set of wheels, was like Bud himself. In a way he had built a mechanical representation of his life, and its oddly-assorted parts could be likened to his patch-work past.

Bud had started out in life as the son of two parents. Each part of his car had likewise begun life in a normal

automotive way. Then had come death in his family. From a normal home he had been thrust into an abnormal situation, and the product of parents was modified by the care of an uncle, and a strange housekeeper. From the wreckage of normal cars Bud had salvaged a part here and a part there, and assembled them, and modified them so they would fit.

Many people had helped design Bud's development. His parents, his uncle, the housekeeper, Jake, his friends, his teachers. He had been influenced by many sources as he grew, and not all the influences were compatible with one another. Yet each had had some effect on his character, and formed him into what he was, a composite person, belonging neither here nor there, and knowing no twin.

So was his car. From the wrecks and abandoned hulks Bud had taken a Ford piece here, a Lincoln piece there, a Cadillac piece somewhere else, reconciled their differences into one body, added something of his own, and created an automobile that was at once similar to and different from all other automobiles. It lived on the same food and obeyed the same laws, but, like Bud, it had no twin. They were both a little different, a little apart, constructed partly by design and partly by accident, made of the materials at hand, formed, as it were, by-guess-and-by-gosh.

No wonder then that Bud felt more than a pride of ownership in this fellow-hybrid that was his car. Made with the work of his hands and the thought of his brains, it was his totem, his companion, his dog, his drawer of shells, his treasured childhood blanket and fuzzy bear.

Together they were a team, Bud's car and himself. Together they had won local fame and leadership on the road and in the shop. And other boys who worshipped speed came to kneel before this stubby, squat, misshapen

little god of speed, and to listen raptly to Bud, the coveralled high priest of the cult. He held chrome engine parts before their eyes, sermonized on gear ratios, chanted of "gow" and "dig" and "drag," and blessed them with a benediction in the form of advice on how to run away from police cars.

Jake Clymer, Bud's boss, was stretched out under a muddy Chevrolet with a trouble light. When he heard Bud drive into the garage, Jake rolled out from under the Chevrolet and got to his feet, wiping his hands on some old rags. Jake was a lantern-jawed man of forty-five who wore rimless glasses and coveralls three sizes too big for his slight figure. "I see you're here," Jake said, looking at the clock on the wall.

"On time as usual," Bud answered.

"Have a nice run?"

"Fair," Bud said, lifting the hood of his car. "I chopped a new Plymouth without any trouble, but she didn't seem to fire right when I got toward four thousand RPM. I'll give my ignition system a look."

"Might be that new automatic pressure pump," Jake said. "But before you get lost with that, there's a little company business has to be done."

"Like what?" Bud asked in a bored voice.

"Like a grease job on that truck and a patch on that red tube in the corner."

"Okay," Bud said dispiritedly, hating to be torn from the interesting problem of his own mechanical troubles. He took down a large suit of stained coveralls from the wall and put them on over his clothes.

Jake grinned. He knew how Bud felt about doing jobs that didn't present a new mechanical problem, but they had to be done, and that's what Bud was getting paid for.

Bud got in the grease pit under the truck and knocked mud from a fitting so he could attach his gun. He worked

with his hands, but his mind was busy with the probable causes of his own troubles. His fuel pressure hadn't shown any drop, so Jake couldn't be right about the pump. One of those carbs, maybe . . .

Jake walked over to the side of the pit. "How are you coming with your plans for that run to Trenton?" he asked casually.

"Okay. . . . What run to Trenton?" Bud's voice was suddenly guarded.

Jake chuckled. "It's no secret, Bud. Everybody knows you've test-run the distance a dozen times. Hear you and Walt Thomas have a ten dollar bet on it."

"We were just talking," Bud grunted, pumping grease. "I said I could make Trenton in thirty minutes, and he said I couldn't."

"It's forty miles," Jake said. "You'd have to average eighty."

"I can do better than that."

"And get killed trying," Jake said. "It ain't all on straight roads, Bud. You've got a full stop when you hit the highway, two big towns to go through and a couple of little ones. You'd have to be driving a hundred on the highway to make it, and we don't know what kind of traffic there'll be."

"I could still do it if I wanted to," Bud argued from under the truck. "I'd need a little more weight, because my baby tends to float after a hundred. But with a couple of sand bags and a passenger she'll hold. And I can touch a hundred and twenty if I have to, Jake."

"Passenger!" Jake laughed. "Who do you think would go on a ride like that?" He added soberly, "Don't let Walt Thomas get your goat, Bud. No ten dollar bet is worth killing yourself and maybe a couple of other people over. It's not right to drive like that on the highway."

"Did I say I was going to?" Bud demanded. "I just said

I could if I wanted to. Somebody's been doing a lot of blabbing about me. I noticed Ted O'Day seemed to be hanging around this area a lot in the last week."

"That's the Highway Patrol's job," Jake said. "Ted's a good fellow."

"I don't care if he does hang around," Bud said defiantly. "I can run away from him any day in the week I want to. But just because I built a fast car, that's no reason for him to pick on me."

"You know what they say, Bud. Where there's smoke there's fire."

"Well, I'm not planning any speed run to Trenton," Bud said. "And you can tell that to Ted O'Day when you see him."

"You tell him," Jake said. "I'm going home to supper, and Ted's driving up now."

"I'll tell him," Bud said. "That uniform doesn't scare me."

Jake cleared his throat. "Say Bud, there's one more thing. . . ."

"On this truck?"

"No. What I want to say, Bud, is that I don't mind if your friends drop around to see you once in a while, but I'd rather they didn't make the station a regular hang-out."

"Okay, Jake," Bud said casually.

"You know how it is with a crowd of big noisy boys hanging around," Jake went on. "Ladies don't like to get out of their cars and it hurts business. You can see that."

"Yeah," Bud said. "I don't like a big crowd around all the time myself. But the drug store closes before we do, and since Pop Huggins started selling beer in the pool room you can't go in unless you're over twenty-one. Where else is there to go?"

"They might try home," Jake said. "Well, I don't mind

a few boys around, but it's bad for business to have a crowd. Try to keep it down, eh, Bud?"

"Yeah, Jake," Bud answered. "I'll try."

"'Night, Bud. That farmer says he'll be in for his truck a little after nine. Keep open for him, will you?"

"Yeah, sure," Bud said, gunning grease into another fitting. "I'll be here anyway. 'Night."

As Jake's legs moved out of Bud's field of vision, another pair moved in to take their place. Legs in brown boots and tan breeches. "Hello, Bud," came from above the legs.

"Hi," Bud answered shortly.

"How's your rod working?" Highway Patrolman Ted O'Day asked pleasantly.

"Fair."

Bud watched narrowly as the booted legs moved toward his car. He hated to have anyone touch it. "I saw you take that Plymouth," O'Day said. "He didn't have a chance."

"I guess not," Bud said noncommittally.

"You were moving pretty fast for the highway," O'Day said with mild reproof.

"There's no speed limit in this state," Bud came back. "Besides, I was testing my motor, that's all."

"What were you doing on the Avondale turn-off?" O'Day asked. "There is a law against reckless driving, and the way you were rocking back and forth across the road could be called that."

"It wasn't either," Bud said angrily. "I was testing something else. I looked. There weren't any other cars on the road. I didn't risk anybody's neck but my own, and that's my business."

"It's mine, too," O'Day snapped. "You know, Bud, there is a law against suicide."

"Oh . . . nuts!" Bud put away the grease gun and crawled out of the pit. He walked over to his car and

leaned against it, wiping his hands on some old rags. "What are you following me around for?" Bud demanded. "I've never been in any wrecks, have I? Have I ever done anything I ought to get pulled in for? I obey lights and signs as well as the next guy. Maybe better."

Ted O'Day brushed off a place on the running board of the Chevrolet and sat down. He was a big six-footer with broad shoulders, a square jaw, light blue eyes and red hair. "You're all right, Bud," he said. "It's those other guys."

"Yeah," Bud agreed readily. "Those other. . . . What do you mean?"

"That's what they all say," Ted said grinning. "It's always the other guy. But forget it. I wanted to have a look at your motor."

"What for?" Bud asked suspiciously.

"Relax," O'Day laughed. "I saw how you rolled today. I'd like to see the power plant that did it."

"Okay," Bud said, feeling flattered. "I could have done better, but I'm having a little trouble somewhere. Maybe one of the carbs. . . ." He lifted the hood and proudly displayed the gleaming motor to O'Day.

The highway patrolman's eyes lighted appreciatively. He leaned across a fender and took in every detail. "Nice work, Bud. All by yourself, huh?"

"Oh, Jake had to show me a lot," Bud admitted, blushing a little.

"Don't kid me," O'Day answered. "I know what Jake can do and what he can't do. Where'd you learn it all?"

"Out of books, mainly," Bud said. "All you have to do is follow instructions, and after a while you can try some ideas of your own."

"Got lots of them?"

"Yeah. Most of them don't seem to work, though."

O'Day pushed his cap back on his head and studied Bud's face. "You like messing with cars, huh?"

Bud nodded. "It's all I . . . It's . . . I don't know how to say it. But when I get working I forget everything. Sometimes I work all night and don't even know how long I've been until I see the sun come up."

"Plan to be a mechanic?"

"What else is there?" Bud asked. "Jake says he'll take me on full time after I'm out of high school in the spring. It's better than anything else I can get."

"Ever think of leaving Avondale?"

Bud shrugged. "What for? I'd just be a mechanic in some other shop, and maybe I wouldn't have the chance to do as much of my own work as I get here. I'll stick."

"What about college?"

"Not a chance. I don't have the money. Besides, the courses I'd want to take would be too tough for me to work my way through. I'm no Einstein, even if I do like technical stuff. I'd need all my time for studying." A wistful look came over Bud's face. "I sure would like to be an automotive engineer. Boy, I've got ideas about cars that if I had a real setup and money behind me. . . . Aaah, what's the use of talking?"

"Too bad," O'Day said half to himself. "You've got a lot of raw talent, Bud. You might do big things if you had the chance. Why don't you fight harder?"

"I'm satisfied the way I am," Bud said, dismissing his dreams. "I'll be out of high school soon, and I'll have a job. I'll be able to work on my own, and maybe invent something here. Anyway, I'll probably get married as soon as I'm set here."

"Married! At your age?"

"I'll be eighteen this summer," Bud said defensively. "It's just about settled."

"Who's the girl?"



"LaVerne Shuler."

O'Day nodded, his face expressionless. "I've seen her. Pretty."

"Yeah." Bud looked at his motor again, forgetting the rest of the grease job on the truck. "What do you think could be wrong? It seemed to be working fine until I got up around . . . around a hundred, and then it went mushy. I'd like to get rid of that bug."

"Don't blame you," O'Day said solemnly, holding back his laughter.

Both of them leaned over the motor while Bud examined the first of his three carburetors. "I want these jugs perfect," Bud muttered. "Can't take any chances conking out. . . ."

". . . on the speed run to Trenton," O'Day finished.

Bud froze. The friendly atmosphere that had developed between the two was gone in a flash. "I don't know what you're talking about," Bud said in a flat voice.

"I do," O'Day said genially. "I heard all about it."

Bud faced the patrolman defiantly. "So what if I do want to make a trip to Trenton? Is that against the law?"

"If you try to make it in thirty minutes, it's bound to be," O'Day answered. "Don't be a fool, Bud. A run like that over the public highway and through towns is like opening fire with a pistol in a crowd."

"I know how to. . . ." Bud began.

"Sure you know how," O'Day said. "I've seen you drive, and I'll tell you myself that I don't know anyone who can handle a car better than you can. But Bud, what about the people who might get in your way, and get rattled? Can you speak for the other drivers you'll meet in tight spots? You can handle the speed of a hundred, but can the people you meet?"

Bud looked at his motor thoughtfully. "I never thought about it that way," he confessed.

"That's the way it is, Bud." O'Day drove home his point. "You like cars, Bud, and you like speed. Okay. There's a place for experiments and for speed, but the public highway isn't that place. I don't want you killing others or yourself trying that Trenton run. You're too important, Bud. Here, in this little shop, you might find something that will make you famous. Do you want to risk losing that over a little speed? And what about LaVerne? Isn't she worth slowing down for?"

Bud nodded silently, reluctantly.

"I don't want to pick on you," O'Day said. "When you're out alone on the road, and the road is clear and you want to test something, you've a right to open up. But stay away from tricks like the Trenton run. It's like playing chicken, and rotation, and . . ."

"I don't do that crazy stuff," Bud interrupted.

"I know. But if you drive recklessly you're setting a bad example. The others can't match your speed, so they try to show off in other ways. In games. You're looked up to by the other fellows, Bud. They know you're tops behind the wheel, and they'll follow your example. Set a good one."

Bud rubbed his chin with his hand. "If you put it that way, I guess the run is off."

"Good boy," O'Day said. He prepared to leave. "Maybe some day when I'm off duty you'll take me out for a ride, eh?"

"Sure," Bud grinned. "Any time."

O'Day got in his patrol car and drove away. Bud went down in the grease pit again and continued his work on the truck. O'Day was okay, really. What he'd said made sense. No use getting knocked off just because a guy like Walt Thomas got under your skin. And he couldn't marry LaVerne if he cracked up trying to make Trenton in thirty minutes. No, sir, LaVerne was worth more than

showing up Walt Thomas. There wasn't going to be any Trenton run. He'd tell Walt, and tell him why—as much as you could tell Walt anything.

In his mind Bud could see how Walt would react to the news that the Trenton run was off. He'd blow to everybody that Bud had lost his nerve, and was chicken, and throw his big stupid weight around and make a lot of noise with his big stupid voice.

Bud jabbed viciously at the mud caked over an alemite fitting. It wasn't going to be easy taking any guff from Walt, because he knew he could make Trenton in thirty minutes. Once he did it, he could shut Walt up for good. Of course, he'd half-promised O'Day not to make the run, but O'Day didn't understand. You couldn't let a guy like Walt crow over you for nothing.

Maybe there would be some other way out. He could take Walt out and scare the pants off him on the back roads. It wasn't really worth risking his car and his neck to win ten bucks from Walt. And O'Day was right about something else. LaVerne was worth slowing down for. A fellow who was thinking of getting married had to settle down. He couldn't spend all his money on auto equipment either, Bud thought. A lot of things would change after he was married. Anyway, that speed run to Trenton was off. He had bigger things to do. He'd tell Walt.

Then, in the distance, he heard Walt Thomas coming around Ninety-Mile-Curve as fast as he could travel.

## Chapter 2

Bud climbed out of the grease pit and stood in the doorway of the garage listening to Walt Thomas race toward town. Bud smiled contemptuously as he estimated Walt's speed from the sound of his approach. Walt's car was just like its owner. A lot of noise and not much performance.

Because Bud loved and understood motors, he had a low opinion of any driver who didn't. Walt was one of those drivers. He could sit behind the wheel and steer and step on the gas, but when anything went wrong he was lost. He never bothered learning how to make repairs and care for his car. When anything broke down he called on Bud.

Walt drove a beat-up Hudson sedan he had bought for fifty dollars. Bud had offered to hop it up for him, but Walt didn't want to spend any money improving the motor. Instead, he'd bought a chrome bob-tail exhaust pipe, mounted flashy horns on the hood, stuck on some Buick-type portholes along the fenders, and added a spotlight and a squirrel tail. Since his car was gaudy and made a lot of noise, Walt thought he traveled fast. He'd been a bully in school and now he was a bully with his car. He liked to show off and run other cars out of his way. Bud wouldn't ride with him.

Bud heard Walt cut his power approaching the S-turn, and he could hear the tires howl as Walt came around the double turn with his foot down. Bud's eyes narrowed as he failed to see Walt's headlights. That crazy Walt. . . .

Walt's black Hudson roared out of the turns and up the incline. Traveling in the dark, without lights, the black car was hard to see. Walt cut in sharply from the road with tires squealing. As soon as he was on gravel he hit

his brakes. His car slid up to the twin gas pumps with all four wheels dragging.

The car had hardly come to a complete halt before Walt kicked his door open and jumped out. He went around to the front of his Hudson and pounded on the headlights with his fist. Bud snorted and walked slowly toward Walt and the Hudson. "Hit it again," Bud drawled as Walt pounded the left light. "You lost the last round."

Walt looked around, his heavy features sullen. Like Bud, he wore a black leather jacket, blue denims, and ornamented boots.

"My lights went out," Walt complained. "Stick in a new fuse, will you?"

Bud opened the door of the Hudson, reached under the dash for the fuse, and looked at it. "When did it blow?"

"On the way in. I dimmed my lights, and when I put my brights back on, everything blew. Happened when I came off the highway."

"It didn't slow you down any," Bud commented disapprovingly.

Walt laughed boastfully. "Why should it? I know the road. Get the fuse, will you? I'm in a hurry."

"Just sticking in a new fuse won't help," Bud said. "Sounds to me like a short in your dimmer switch. Run your heap in the garage and I'll fix it for you."

"Naw, I ain't got time," Walt said carelessly. "Give me a new fuse and I'll shove."

"Your lights will go the first time you hit the switch."

"I won't hit it, then," Walt answered. "I'll drive with my brights. I'll come in some time when I'm not in a hurry and let you fix the short."

Bud was reluctant to let Walt leave with a defective part on his car. It offended his sense of mechanics. "A short will drain your battery," Bud argued. "I can fix it in a couple of minutes."

"Some other time, I said. You hard up for business tonight?"

"Okay," Bud said. "Want any gas?"

"Just the fuse."

"Big deal," Bud grunted. "I suppose you want your windshield washed and air put in your tires."

"I expect service," Walt replied. He laughed loudly and punched Bud on the arm. "Hurry with that fuse, boy."

While Bud put in a new fuse Walt went inside the service station. Taking two nickels from his pocket he put one in the pop machine and another in the pinball machine. He shot a couple of balls and watched the lights and numbers flash. Bud came in and watched.

Walt shot the third ball and watched its noisy progress with mounting excitement. "Watch me beat this machine," he said to Bud. He put down his bottle and grasped the machine with both hands, shaking it to influence the course of the rolling ball.

"You'll get a tilt," Bud warned.

"No I won't," Walt said belligerently. "I'm going to whip this machine right now. . . . Aaaaah! . . ."

"Told you you'd get a tilt," Bud said.

"Go put my fuse in," Walt growled, digging for another nickel.

"It's in. I thought you were in a hurry."

"One more game and I'll go," Walt said. "Watch me this time."

Walt didn't learn from his first experience and tilted the machine again. He swore in disgust and paid Bud for the fuse. He went out, jumped in his car, and started off in a shower of flying gravel. Bud winced as he watched Walt manhandle his motor. The Hudson bounced up the street and turned in sharply in front of the drug store. Walt got out and went in the store. Bud shook his head.

Walt would sit in there and hog sweets until the place closed. Then he'd be back. Him and his big hurry.

Bud walked back to the garage. He could hear if anyone drove up for service, and he'd rather go to work on his motor than sit around in the service station. If he found out what was wrong in a hurry he'd be able to take LaVerne for a ride after he closed Jake's place.

Whistling happily, Bud dismounted the carburetors and took them apart, examining each piece carefully. He looked up as he heard feet on the gravel outside, and then two boys of twelve, Jimmy Brown and Kenny Smith joined him. Jimmy was heavy-set and self-confident, Kenny smaller and shyer.

"Hi, kids," Bud said. "What's new?"

The two boys squatted beside Bud and looked on. Both were dressed as much like him as possible, with ordinary leather jackets, blue denims, and boots. "Walt came in the drug store," Kenny said. "He started pushing us around, so we came up to watch you."

"Some day I'm gonna pop that guy right on the nose," Jimmy said in a shrill, belligerent voice.

Bud grinned. "You watch out for Walt. He's pretty big."

"He talks big," Jimmy said. "But I told him off to-night."

"I'll bet you did," Bud chuckled.

"Yeah. I said I was sure gonna give him the laugh when he had to pay you that ten bucks."

Bud held a small part up to the light. "What ten bucks?"

"The ten you're gonna win when you make that run to Trenton in thirty minutes," Jimmy said.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Bud said, looking straight at Jimmy.

"Sure." Jimmy winked. "I know. I won't tell anybody, will we, Kenny?" Kenny shook his head.

"Well don't," Bud warned, "because I'm not making any run."

"But we heard. . . ."

"Don't believe everything you hear."

Jimmy stood up and peeked inside Bud's car, his eyes glowing. "Can you really do a hundred and twenty, Bud?" Jimmy asked in an awed voice.

"Uhhuh."

"You'll make it in thirty minutes," Jimmy assured Bud. "I wish I had some money of my own to put down on you."

"Listen, small fry," Bud said, his voice rising, "I told you there wasn't going to be any run and I meant it. Now shut up about it. I'm not going to risk my car or my neck for any ten bucks belonging to Walt Thomas, and that's final."

The hero-worship in Jimmy's eyes died. "Ain't you going to show up Walt Thomas?"

"No," Bud said savagely. "So shut up about it."

The two boys squatted despondently beside him and watched him work. Finally Jimmy nudged Kenny and they stood up. "We're going in the service station for a coke," Jimmy said to Bud. "Okay?"

"Okay, but don't hang around. Jake told me he didn't want you kids hanging around here every night."

"Where else. . . ." Jimmy began.

"Go home," Bud growled. "You've got a home, haven't you?"

The two boys slipped out of the garage and went for their drinks. Bud heard the pinball machine working as they fed it nickels. After a while, he decided, he'd chase them. Darn kids. What business of theirs was it if he won ten from Walt or not? Wanted him to get killed just be-



cause Walt pushed them around. Didn't see his side of it at all. He was the one who had to take all the chances.

Jimmy and Kenny played the pinball machine and wondered what was wrong with Bud. He'd always been their friend, and would talk to them about motors and speed. Golly, if he turned against them, too, they'd be lost. They admired Bud and looked up to him because everybody knew he was the best driver in town and had the fastest car. Now he wasn't even going to show up Walt Thomas.

"I wish I had that rod of Bud's," Jimmy said. "I bet I could win that ten from Walt."

"Me, too," Kenny said. "If I could drive."

"I can," Jimmy said. "I've been practicing with my dad's car."

"Aw, he wouldn't let you. . . ."

"When nobody was home, stupid," Jimmy said. "It's easy. You just wait and see. I'll be a hotter driver than Bud one of these days. Do you think he's losing his nerve?"

"Seems like it," Kenny said slowly. "I wouldn't, if I had a car."

"Me neither," Jimmy said stoutly. "I wish we had a car right now. I'd take you out and show you how good I can drive."

"You should see me on my new bike," Kenny said, hunting for something to brag about. "I'm really hot." He looked out of the window. "Here comes Bud. Think we ought to leave?"

"Naw," Jimmy said. "Let's wait until he throws us out. Got another nickel for the machine? If we're customers, we can stay."

Bud stuck his head in the door. "You jokers still here?"

"Yeah, Bud," Jimmy said. "We're keeping an eye on the place for you."

"Thanks," Bud said drily. "If LaVerne comes around send her over to the garage, will you?"

"She's in the drug store talking to. . . ." Kenny began, but Jimmy kicked him, and he didn't finish.

"Sure, Bud," Jimmy said heartily. "We'll stick right here until she comes. We'll do that for you."

"Give me a yell if anybody comes for service," Bud said, picking up the tool he had come after. "And keep away from the candy bars."

"What was the idea of shooting off your mouth about LaVerne talking to Walt?" Jimmy demanded when Bud had left. "You want to get Bud sore?"

"Well," Kenny said wisely, "if Bud knew Walt was after his girl, maybe he'd be mad enough to win that ten bucks from Walt by making the run to Trenton."

"Let him find out by himself," Jimmy said. "He might get mad at us, too, and we couldn't hang around here any more. I wish he'd take me on that Trenton run."

"You think he's fooling about not going?"

"Sure. He's just trying to keep it quiet. Golly, if the cops found out they'd be laying for him and he'd never make it. Let's have a candy bar."

"I don't have any more money," Kenny said. "And Bud told us to keep away from them."

"We'll pay him tomorrow," Jimmy ruled. "Besides, he owes us something for watching the place."

"I don't think we should, Jimmy."

"With or without nuts?" Jimmy asked, holding up two candy bars.

Kenny sighed. "With."

Bud finished putting his three carburetors back in place. Before starting the motor to see what further adjustments they needed, he looked toward the service station. Inside, half a dozen high school boys were standing around playing the pinball machine. Outside, a crowd of

younger boys were ripping around on bicycles, tearing up gravel with practice skids.

"Hey, you kids!" Bud yelled. "Quit messing up my gravel." They ignored him.

Bud lifted his hat and scratched his head, then turned to his car. He got in and started it, then got out and listened to the motor. In twenty seconds all the boys hanging around the service station were at his side.

"Goin' for a spin, Bud?"

"Can I go with you, Bud?"

"Take me, Bud. I ain't had a ride yet."

And so on, a yelping chorus. The older boys crowded in, too, pushing the smaller ones aside. They all made so much noise Bud couldn't hear his motor. He turned it off and closed the hood. "Why don't you go home?" Bud said to all of them at once.

"What's the matter, waiting for LaVerne?"

"We'll go when she comes, Bud."

"You better watch out," one boy said carelessly. "Walt's beating your time."

Bud swung around and grabbed the boy by the front of his jacket and slammed him against the wall. Bud's lips were tight, his eyes hot with anger. He thrust his face within inches of the other boy's. "What'd you say?" he snarled.

The boy pushed at Bud's hand. "Lemme go, Bud. I didn't say anything."

"What was that crack about LaVerne and Walt?"

"Nothing, Bud. I was just kidding."

"I don't like that kind of kidding. Don't try to push my hand away."

The boy dropped his hand, and the others, who were watching, relaxed. There wouldn't be any fight. Nobody liked to fight with Bud. He fought like he drove. Hard and good.

"I'm sorry, Bud."

Bud dropped his hand to his side. He suddenly felt silly. "I'm sorry too, Pete. I ought to be able to take a little kidding." He glanced around and noticed that there was little sympathy for him among the boys. He wanted to redeem himself. "I've been jumpy today," he admitted, tilting his hat forward. "Highway patrol was in tonight eating me out for going so fast they couldn't catch me to give me a ticket."

The boys laughed admiringly, and Bud knew they were his again. "I don't give two hoots about the patrol," he bragged, "but it gets a guy when they pick on him."

There was an assenting chorus of "You bets," and a couple of voices asked him about the Trenton run. Bud just grinned and shook his head, and they laughed again. Just then LaVerne Shuler walked into the garage accompanied, as usual, by Marge Anderson.

Bud turned to the group of boys. "Why don't you guys go play the pinball machine for a while? I want to talk to LaVerne." As the boys moved away Bud turned to Marge. "You too, Marge."

"Oh, Marge can stay," LaVerne protested languidly. "I don't have any secrets from Marge." What she really meant was that she didn't want Marge to be around other boys unless she, LaVerne, was on hand to out-shine her friend.

LaVerne Shuler with her black hair and intense eyes was the prettiest girl in Avondale, and Marge was probably the homeliest. Although she didn't realize it in so many words, LaVerne liked to be seen with Marge because then she, LaVerne, was always sure of being the center of attraction, and able to beat down any competition that might come from Marge.

Marge, for her part, was content to trail along. She knew she was homely, and that being with LaVerne only

made LaVerne seem prettier and herself homelier, but there were compensations. As long as she stayed with LaVerne she would be invited out when LaVerne was. Otherwise, alone, the boys would never ask her to go anywhere.

LaVerne looked around the garage with a grimace of distaste. She didn't like the garage, the strong bare lights, the dirty pieces of disused machinery, the grease and oil. She was repelled by its barren walls and harsh echoes. She didn't like the baggy coveralls that Bud wore when he was working. She resented the time Bud spent fussing with his car, but she liked to go riding in it.

"There isn't any place to sit down," she complained touching the artificial white flower she had pinned to her long black hair.

Bud looked around. "I guess not." He grinned.

LaVerne wasn't amused. "Are you about ready to take me for the ride you promised?"

"After a while," Bud said. "I've got a little more work to do on the carbs, and I have to hang around until the farmer comes for his truck."

"Always something," LaVerne sniffed.

"Can't help it," Bud said. "Want to sit in the heap and wait? You can talk to me while I work."

"I don't feel like sitting," LaVerne said. "I'm bored sitting. I want to ride."

"We will," Bud said. "As soon as I can get away."

"I want to go now."

"Aw, LaVerne, you know I have to stick around." Bud looked at Marge and then at LaVerne. "You might as well get used to waiting for me. There'll be a lot of it later, when I'm working full time and we're . . . later."

"That will be different," LaVerne said petulantly. "I won't mind waiting after we're married, but I want to have some fun now."

Bud tossed a screwdriver in the air and caught it. "I'll take you out as soon as I'm through."

LaVerne saw the way Bud was looking at his motor. "You think more of puttering around with a dirty old motor than you do of being with me," she accused.

"It's not a dirty old motor," Bud responded indignantly. "It's . . ."

"Hi, people." Bud was interrupted by Walt Thomas swaggering into the garage.

Bud didn't welcome the intrusion. "Don't you ever go home, Walt?"

"When every place else is closed," Walt answered. There was more than a touch of bitterness in his voice. "You wait until you graduate, Bud. You and all the rest. There's plenty to keep you busy while you're in school, but you just wait until you're out, like me. Can't even shoot a game of pool at Pop's now that he's selling beer. Not until I'm twenty-one, and that's three more years."

"Your game will be pretty rusty by then, won't it?" Bud commented unsympathetically.

"Not much to do but ride around in my heap," Walt said. "That's fun." He advanced to Bud's side and looked over his shoulder. "Getting ready to take that ten bucks from me?"

"No."

Walt laughed. "Decided I was right, huh? Talked too big, didn't you?"

"No." Bud's voice was tight with anger.

"Well, then, why won't you try for that ten? Scared?"

"No. I just decided against it."

"But Bud. . . ." LaVerne looked hurt. "Bud, you promised you'd take me along."

"I'm not doing it, LaVerne. I changed my mind."

"But Bud. . . ." She was at his side, disappointed. "I've

been looking forward to the ride. Haven't we, Marge?" Marge nodded.

"It's all off," Bud said stubbornly. "Anyway, I wouldn't take you on a ride like that. It's too dangerous."

"I like danger," LaVerne said huskily. "It's so dull around here. It's fun to go fast. Please, Bud. I know I'll love it. My heart will be in my throat, but I'll . . . I'll love it." She stood close to Bud, rubbing her cheek on his shoulder.

Bud was confused. He'd promised O'Day not to make the run because LaVerne was worth slowing down for. Now she was the one who wanted speed and thrills. What about that? The trouble with her, it was just a fast ride to her. She didn't know what he needed from the motor, or the problems of timing. It wasn't fair to risk their future together for the sake of showing up Walt Thomas.

"I'm sorry, LaVerne," Bud said. "It's off."

"Chicken!" Walt whooped. "I knew it. Chicken!"

For the second time that night Bud was ready for violence. He was smaller than Walt, but he knew he could flick that big tub of lard. "Shut up!" Bud gritted, giving Walt a hard push. "You open your yap like that to me or anybody else and I'll tear you apart."

"Quit your shoving," Walt ordered, taking a step back. "Don't try to get wise with me, or. . . ."

"Shut up!"

Bud's long face was taut with rage, his eyes wild. Walt opened his mouth and shut it again. "You hear?" Bud said with difficulty, his clenched fists trembling. "You hear? If you think I'm chicken I'll take you on the back road tonight and prove I've got more guts than you if I have to kill you doing it. You hear? Now beat it."

Walt laughed shakily but left the garage. He walked to the service station and joined the other boys. Bud

watched him. "If he makes a single crack. . . ." Bud muttered.

"A nice evening this has been," LaVerne stormed. "Fights and arguments and no fun at all. I'm going home."

"Aw, stay around and keep me company," Bud said, trying to placate her.

"Marge can stay if she wants to," LaVerne said defiantly, "but I'm going home."

"I'll run you home after a while, LaVerne," Bud promised. "And we can ride around all you want to. If you wait."

"I'm tired of waiting. I'd rather walk than hang around this dirty old place. Come on, Marge."

The two girls went out and disappeared into the darkness. Bud stared after them. LaVerne was hard to figure out, sometimes. Sometimes he wasn't sure if she liked him or the fact that he always had a car that would run. Still, they'd talked about getting married. He didn't know. Women weren't like cars. You could figure out a car. Bud went back to work on his, and forgot all his troubles but those of a mechanical nature.

At nine he closed the service station and the boys went home. Walt was already gone. But since the farmer hadn't shown up for his truck, Bud kept the garage open and worked on his car.

About twenty minutes later a car drove up outside. Bud hoped it was the farmer, but he recognized the Chevy tudor as "My-Son-Ralph" Osler's car.

It wasn't Ralph's fault he had that nickname. But Ralph's father, a local lawyer with money, had tried in too many ways to pave his son's road. Ralph had gone out for football, and his father had showed up for every game and every practice session. Whenever Ralph was on the bench, his father would ask the coach, "Why isn't my son



"Ralph playing?" The name stuck. Ralph was used to it now, and didn't mind.

Ralph was a tall, good-looking boy with wavy hair and a straight profile. With him, as he entered the garage, was Chuck Liddell, a short, stocky boy with a rugged face that lost nothing of its athletic cut because of the rimless glasses he wore. Both boys were wearing white Avondale school sweaters with a big maroon A on the chest.

"Having trouble?" Bud greeted the boys.

"No," Ralph said. "We were just driving around and saw your light and decided to drop in."

"Glad you did," Bud said. He'd been feeling lonely after the way LaVerne had left.

Ralph went to Bud's rod and looked it over. "I'd sure like to get me a hop-up like this," he said longingly. "I'm trying to talk my dad into letting me go to California and buy one."

"Why go there?" Bud said. "Maybe I'll sell you mine."

"No," Ralph said. "You're kidding."

"I mean it. I'm getting tired of it."

"Boy," Ralph said joyfully, "you've got yourself a customer. How much?"

"I haven't figured," Bud said. "Maybe your Chevvy and some cash to boot."

"That wouldn't be fair. Your rod's worth five times my Chevvy. What's the catch?"

"No catch," Bud said. "I'm tired of fooling with all the extra junk, adding carbs and ignition systems and all the rest. I want to do some experimenting with a stock model like yours. See if I can't do something that will make the ordinary stock car a better machine. I won't do that trying to build a track racer. I figure that the average, ordinary motor can be improved a lot, and that's where the future is."

"You've made a deal, then," Ralph said enthusiastically. "Boy, will I roll now."

"I wouldn't sell your car to My-Son-Ralph if I were you," Chuck said. "He's crazy enough on the road with his old Chevy. He'll be murder with a souped-up job."

"I'll check him out on it before I let him drive alone," Bud said. "It will take a week to teach him how to handle it."

"I'm not kidding," Chuck said. "My-Son-Ralph shouldn't have it. It's too much power."

Ralph laughed, not taking offense. "Just because Chuck doesn't drive, everything scares him."

"Not everything," Chuck said. "But some things you do scare me. Like trying to brush other cars, or running stop signs and lights."

"Oh *that*," Ralph said. "Nothing to worry about. My Chevy is so slow the cops are always able to catch me, and my father has to square things for me in court. But with Bud's rod, I'll never be caught. Father will appreciate that. When do I get your heap, Bud? After the Trenton run?"

"The Trenton run is off," Bud said. "You can have it as soon as you know how to handle it. Want a lesson tonight?"

"Sure thing."

"Okay. As soon as the farmer gets his truck, we'll take off. Meanwhile, let's have a coke."

When the farmer had taken his truck, Bud drove his car out of the garage. Then Ralph got behind the wheel, and with Chuck in the middle and Bud on the end, Ralph was ready for his first lesson.

"Take off easy but steadily," Bud said. "Not too much power. This isn't your old Chevy."

"Okay. Here we go."

Ralph depressed the accelerator. The stubby little rod

leaped forward, wheels digging gravel. "Wow!" Ralph exclaimed, lifting his foot. "That was. . . ." He tried to get going again, and after several spasmodic leaps he killed the engine. "Wow," Ralph said again. "This is hotter than a two dollar pistol."

"Try again," Bud said. "Easy and steady."

"Help," Chuck said in a faint whisper.

Later they rolled along the highway at fifty, the top speed Bud would allow Ralph to drive. "Handles like a dream," Ralph said. "And it's going to be mine. Mine!"

"Yeah," Bud sighed. "I guess I've lost my taste for speed or something. Anyway, when a guy's planning on getting married, he feels like taking it easy."

"Don't blame you," Chuck said.

"I'll make the run for you," Ralph promised.

"See," Chuck said to Bud. "He's nuts. Don't let him have your car."

"Too late," Ralph said. "The deal's been made."

Bud looked out of the window. "Turn right here and come back over dirt roads. You'll have to know how she handles on dirt."

Ralph followed directions. "She floats, Bud. A dream, a real dream."

Two miles on Ralph suddenly said "Oh-oh."

"What's up?" Bud was alert for some mechanical trouble.

Ralph laughed. "I see old Walt Thomas's Hudson parked out here. Wonder who's with him?"

"Maybe it's Marge Anderson," Bud said. "She'd go out with anybody just to have a date."

"Marge can't help being homely," Chuck said in her defense. He was like that.

"I know," Bud replied. "But with Walt. . . . Any girl who goes out and parks with Walt doesn't care much about her reputation."

"They've seen us," Ralph chuckled. "Look."

The headlights of Bud's car were full on the back of Walt's Hudson. Suddenly Walt's scowling face filled the rear window of the Hudson, and a moment later another face joined his. A dainty, indignant face framed with black hair. Black hair with a white artificial flower pinned to one side.

"Couldn't see who she was," Ralph lied as he drove past.

"Me either," Chuck added hastily.

Bud didn't say anything. The two other boys were afraid to look at him. Ralph frowned and drove faster, tearing into the night, as though by speeding he could help Bud.

Bud was silent, and spoke only once on the trip home. And that was merely to warn Ralph to be careful on loose gravel. When they were back at the garage, Bud spoke again. "I won't be trading for a while, Ralph," he said tautly. "I'll be needing my rod."

"Okay, Bud." Ralph and Chuck drove off in Ralph's Chevy, leaving Bud alone with his car outside the darkened garage.

There was betrayal. Why?

There was revenge. How?

Two powerful emotions struggled violently to possess Bud. The first was the shock of betrayal and the sense of loss and despair that followed. The other was hatred and a desire for revenge.

Accustomed to do all his thinking alone, Bud waited until now, when his friends were gone, to let his emotions flare up. He paced, but pacing brought no answer, and he turned at last, to his car. In that, behind the wheel, he could think. Give him the road and speed, the roar and rock of motion, and he could think. It had always worked before, and it would work again.

Grim-faced, Bud got in his car and headed for the open road. He wounded the earth with hot wheels as he threw the little car and himself into motion. Out and away, following the white beams of light his car glared at the darkness, Bud sat behind the wheel and drove hard and fast. Drove with his hands and feet while his mind wrestled with the why of betrayal and the how of revenge.

Out on the road he sought the answers as he had always sought answers. Out on the road he sped like the wind, as though to out-race his heartache and give his hatred a wild velocity.

He drove, and for hours his faithful little car roamed highways and back roads, roaring back and forth across the darkened countryside like a wounded animal bellowing its pain and rage.

## Chapter 3

IN A FAR CORNER of Jake Clymer's garage Bud Crayne worked alone on his car. What a fool he'd been, almost giving away this baby for LaVerne Shuler's sake. He knew better now. From now on he was going to stick to hop-ups, and leave girls alone. You could count on a motor you put together yourself. It would never let you down.

It was good medicine to get back to his chrome mill. When he worked it took away some of the hurt, and he could forget, for minutes at a time. His hot rage had given way to a cold hate. He was going to fix Walt Thomas, and fix him right. It could all be done with speed.

It had been all over Avondale High. Everybody knew that LaVerne had been out with Walt, and they knew the Trenton run was off. In one day Bud lost the respect and awe he was used to, and he knew they were laughing behind his back and calling him chicken. They all thought Walt had called his bluff. The way they looked at it, Walt had made Bud back down about the Trenton boast, and then, to rub in his victory, had taken Bud's girl out on a date. No wonder they'd giggled behind his back at school. He could see it in their eyes, too. He'd taken a tumble in their estimation. Walt was the leader now.

He'd show them. Bud's lips tightened. He'd show them who was chicken.

At first he'd intended to hunt up Walt and whip him. He'd imagined the fight a dozen times—how he'd walk up to Walt and say he didn't like the idea of Walt being out with his girl. Walt would try to bully his way out of the situation, and that would be Bud's cue to let him have it. A dozen times at least he went through that fight in his

mind, and although each time he saw it end with Walt beaten and battered, he wasn't satisfied. That wasn't the answer.

No, the answer was in speed. He had to do a couple of things at once. He had to make Walt Thomas look sick, and at the same time, he had to win back his leadership in the speed department. There was only one way he could do both, and that was make the Trenton run. He'd beat Walt that way, and silence the talk about his being chicken. When he made the run in thirty minutes, all the guys would be his again, and Walt would be the goat. No one would even think about a little thing like Walt's date with LaVerne.

"To think I almost gave you away, baby," Bud muttered to his car. "We'll make it together. We'll show them all."

Everything was set for the Trenton run. He'd added weight with a couple of bags of sand, the weather was good, and it was the time to go. He wondered about taking someone along. He ought to have a witness with him. Maybe My-Son-Ralph. Everyone would believe him. He'd see.

Bud heard a car drive up and started out to see if someone wanted gas. He was met at the garage door by Guy Cole, the shop teacher at the high school. Mr. Cole was a slight, mild man with thinning blond hair. Bud liked Mr. Cole because the little man could talk motors with him. But Bud wasn't anxious to get involved in talk with his Trenton run an hour away.

"Well, Bud," Mr. Cole greeted him, "how are your experiments with the carburetors coming along?"

"Fair." The answer was designed to discourage conversation, but Mr. Cole didn't seem to notice. He walked past Bud to look at Bud's motor.

"Learn anything new, Bud?"

Bud grinned despite himself. "Only that the people who make them have some good ideas, too."

Mr. Cole chuckled.

"I had an idea," Bud said, unable to resist talk about motors. "It would take a lot of work, and I'm not sure I'm on the right track."

"What's that?"

"Well. . . ." He shoved his hands in his pockets and looked at his gleaming motor. "It's like this, Mr. Cole. I feel that the stock car is a long way from being what it should be. There ought to be ways to make the average family car more efficient, and I think I can find some of the answers. It's fun to hop-up motors like this one, but I won't find out much that can help the average driver. My idea is to get a stock car and begin working on it. I want to examine every piece of the car, and, working part by part, try to find weak spots. I might find a weak spot in the ignition, or the gear or compression ratios, or the design of the block. . . . I might not find anything, but it's worth the try."

"It's an excellent idea, Bud, and it fits in with what I came to talk to you about."

"I could just be wasting my time," Bud said thoughtfully. "They say in another ten years cars will be driven by gas turbines, and gasoline engines will be through. If that's the case, I'd be wasting my time."

"No serious study is wasted time," Mr. Cole said. "Who knows what the engine of the future will be? Gas turbines present a number of difficulties. An improved gasoline engine and improved fuel might be the answer. You can't give up because something *might* happen to interfere with your ideas. And if gas turbines are used, you'll know about them too, Bud. You won't lag behind. The idea is to do what is best for the average motorist. In



every way. That's why I wanted to see you this afternoon. I need your help."

"Motor trouble?" Bud asked. "I'll get right at it."

"Bud," Mr. Cole said seriously, "I need your help in a very important project. I want to save some lives."

Bud looked at the floor. It was coming now. A lecture about his Trenton run.

"I want your help," the teacher said, "in getting a Driver Training Program established here at Avondale High."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Well," Mr. Cole said, "it's more than teaching students how to drive. You know a driver can't really be tops unless he understands the machine he's operating. I thought you might like to help teach automobile operation and function. You could get that across."

"Sure," Bud agreed. "They could come down to the garage, and watch me work. I'd explain everything I knew."

"Fine, Bud. That would be a fine beginning. And one more thing."

"Yes?"

"I'd like you to be the first one to sign up for the course of driving instruction."

Bud's chin dropped. "Me? I couldn't do *that*."

"Why not?"

"Not me," Bud said, shaking his head. "Why gosh, Mr. Cole, what could I learn about handling a car? Even Ted O'Day, the highway patrolman, told me I was tops when it came to driving. I'd look silly making believe I didn't know how to shift or steer. I'd get razed right out of school. I'd be glad to help teach, though."

It was Mr. Cole's turn to protest. "Teach? I should say not, Bud. You don't understand the idea of driver training."

"To drive," Bud said. "Nothing to that."

"Bud," Mr. Cole said, "tell me what you think of this. In our state, only one per cent of the drivers are under twenty, yet they're involved in over twelve percent of the accidents. Any comment?"

"Some of them don't know how to drive, that's all," Bud said.

"I'm not through. Of those drivers under twenty who had accidents, seven per cent were because of excessive speed, another seven per cent for following other cars too closely, and another seven disregarded stop signs or traffic lights. Now, Bud. Fifteen per cent of those accidents were caused by failure to yield the right of way, and twelve per cent for being on the wrong side of the road. What does that mean to you?"

"They're dumb," Bud said. "How can you cure that?"

"They're not dumb, Bud. Those young drivers haven't learned to drive. They can operate a car all right, and make it go as fast as anyone else, but they haven't learned the one most important factor in driving—the proper attitude. Those accidents I mentioned weren't due to mechanical failures, or drinking, or not knowing how to handle a car. They were all due to a bad driving attitude. The purpose of the driver training program is to teach not only proper driving habits, but the proper attitude."

Bud grinned. "I don't think you'll get very far. All the kids are crazy for wheels, and when they get them, they own the road. You can't change human nature."

"Listen, Bud," Mr. Cole tried again. "Give me your opinion on this. In a football game between eleven boys who taught themselves to play, and eleven boys who were well-coached, who would win?"

"The best team," Bud said evasively.

"You're cornered," Mr. Cole said. "The coached boys would win. Do you know why? Because they'd be coached

to do the right thing at the right time, and doing the right thing would have become instinctive. A boy who learns a sport from a coach avoids learning bad habits. A boy who picks up a sport often has a hard time being a good player because he has to unlearn as much as he has to learn. It's the same with driving. If I can start with boys and girls who've never touched a wheel, I can teach them the right habits and attitudes. Afterwards they'll no more make the foolish errors that lead to accidents than a good basketball player would tuck the ball under his arm and run. They'll play the driving game according to the rules, because it will become a part of their thinking. I'm right, Bud. I've seen it happen at other schools."

Bud took off his old fedora hat. "I don't see why you want me in the course," he said, studying the huge safety pin in the brim. "I can drive, and you want to teach non-drivers."

"You need it, too," Mr. Cole said.

"Not me," Bud's pride was hurt. If there was anything he could do, it was drive. "Not me, Mr. Cole. I don't want to brag, but I don't think anybody in these parts could teach me anything about driving."

"I don't know about that, Bud. A review of fundamentals never hurt anyone. You know, during the war when a pilot had so much combat time to his credit, they used to send him back to the rear areas to go through a refresher course with a Link Trainer. Even the best needed that. It might be the same with driving, too."

Bud shook his head. "I just couldn't do it, Mr. Cole. I can't see myself making believe I don't know how to drive. I'd feel like a fool."

"We need you, Bud," Mr. Cole said. "All the boys and girls around here look up to you when it comes to cars. Your word is automotive law, so to speak. They all want to be like you. You're influencing them to be hot-rodders."

And since they can't handle a car as well as you can, they have accidents. But if *you* took driver training, and admitted *you* could learn something from it, they'd all come in."

Bud stared past Mr. Cole, a grim look on his mouth. "They don't look up to me," he said in a flat voice. "Not any more." He could just imagine what the kids would say if, after letting Walt get the better of him about the Trenton run, he took high school training in driving. That would be the end of him in Avondale.

"Don't let them get your goat," Mr. Cole said quietly. "It isn't worth it. They'll forget in a couple of days without your killing yourself trying to beat Walt Thomas."

Bud looked startled, and Mr. Cole grinned. "We teachers hear a few things, too," he chuckled. "And I know what's in your mind. Show them all by driving to Trenton in thirty minutes. That's the easy way out."

"It's not so easy. . . ." Bud bristled.

"It's the dangerous way, but the easy way," Mr. Cole said. "The hard way is to do what's right. What does Walt Thomas mean compared to the future you're risking?"

Bud didn't answer. It was easy for Cole to talk. He didn't have to face the sneers, or hear Walt brag.

"There's another reason I wanted to see you," Mr. Cole said. "Bud, how would you like to win a scholarship to an engineering school, all expenses paid?"

Bud whirled, everything else forgotten. "Whaaat?" He couldn't believe his ears. A future, a real future. . . .

"Perhaps I shouldn't tell you about this now," Mr. Cole said, "but maybe it will save you from making that crazy run. Bud, in an effort to lower the teen-age accident rate in the state, there is going to be a Teen-Age Roadeo. The winning driver gets a complete college scholarship."

"I can win it," Bud said wildly. "I can win it. Honest, Mr. Cole, I can win it."

"Maybe, Bud. I'm not so sure."

Bud's eyes glowed. "I'm sure. I can out-drive any . . ."

"In the first place, Bud," Mr. Cole said, "you'd have to win the county contest."

"Easy," Bud said. "That's easy."

"In the second place, any driver with even one traffic violation on his record in the twelve months preceding the contest won't be allowed to enter."

"My record's clean," Bud said. "Not a ticket."

"If you get a ticket," Mr. Cole said. "You'll have to wait another year."

"I won't get a ticket," Bud insisted. "I can take it easy for a prize like that."

"I told you about the Roadeo in advance so you wouldn't make that wild ride to Trenton," Mr. Cole said. "Now is it worth calling off?"

Bud laughed exultantly. "You bet it is, Mr. Cole. Why, once I've won that scholarship, I'll be on my way. I'll be through with this town. I won't muff that prize."

Mr. Cole smiled slightly. "In that case, you'd better let me start instructing you."

Bud choked. "But Mr. Cole. . . ."

"Believe me, Bud, you'll lose if you don't."

Bud set his jaw stubbornly. This was one point on which he wouldn't budge. "I'll keep out of trouble, Mr. Cole, but I'll stick to my own brand of driving."

"I won't argue about that any more," Mr. Cole said, "but you think it over. I'm talking driver training to the board of education tonight. If I could tell them you were considering taking the course, it would help. . . ."

Bud rubbed his nose, hating to turn down as nice a person as Mr. Cole. "Well," Bud said reluctantly, "if it will

help, you can say I'm considering it. Don't say I'm taking it. Just considering, Mr. Cole."

"All right, Bud," the teacher agreed. "Considering. That's good enough for now. You've got something to work for, Bud. Keep your nose clean."

Bud chuckled. "Don't worry. From now on, I don't drive over thirty. Not with that scholarship. . . ."

"Keep it under your hat, Bud. I really shouldn't have told you, but I had to keep you from breaking your neck."

"Thanks," Bud called as Mr. Cole left. "Thanks a lot."

As Mr. Cole drove away—and Bud smiled to see how cautiously he drove—Jimmy and Kenny rode up on their bicycles to get some free air. They dismounted by the air hose and avoided looking at Bud.

"Hey, you two," Bud called jovially, "don't use all the air."

"We won't," Jimmy answered without turning around.

Bud stared at the two boys. Jimmy and Kenny too, eh? Deserting him with the rest. He could tell by the way they acted.

"I don't want you kids hanging around here tonight," Bud shouted. "Understand?"

The two boys didn't answer, but jumped on their bikes. As they circled around they looked at Bud, and he could see the disillusionment in their faces. They thought he was chicken, too. "Go on!" Bud shouted. "Beat it." He watched them leave without sassing him back, and his heart was heavy. It wasn't easy to take, when he knew he could show them all. It wasn't easy.

Bud walked slowly into the garage and to his hop-up. He looked at it fondly. "We could do it," he muttered. "We could do it, and shut them all up, couldn't we? But I guess it isn't worth it. Mr. Cole is right, baby. It isn't worth the risk. Guess I'll have to trade you off to My-Son-Ralph, so I won't be tempted."

Bud leaned against the front fender and stared thoughtfully at the floor. If there was only some way to fix Walt Thomas without taking the chance of losing a place in the Roadeo. . . .

LaVerne Shuler halted just inside the garage door. For once she was alone, without Marge Anderson at her heels. LaVerne stood for a moment, watching Bud, a slight smile on her face. She thought he was brooding over her, and was pleased. She knew Bud was angry, and had avoided her at school all day, but she knew how to handle him. She could explain.

LaVerne walked toward Bud trying to appear sorry, but not too sorry. The idea she wanted to get across was that she regretted her actions of the night before, but that if Bud said anything mean to her, he would be picking on her.

It wasn't difficult for LaVerne to act the part she chose. She loved to act, and although no one suspected it, she acted all day long. She was always aware of the way she stood, or sat, or looked, or talked. Acting was easy for her because she loved it. She was going to get the lead in the school play, and, if she had the chance, she was sure she could be an actress in Hollywood.

She had started going steady with Bud because his fast car made him the hero of the school, and LaVerne considered it only natural that she should be the heroine who was the hero's girl friend. Bud had talked marriage to her, and LaVerne had agreed, with certain mental reservations. She would marry Bud, she decided, if she was unable to get away from Avondale on her own. In that case, once they were married, she would make him dissatisfied with Avondale too, and get him to go to California, where she would find some opportunity of crashing the movies.

There was another, immediate reason why she was Bud's girl. She liked him better than any of the other

local boys, but it wasn't that. LaVerne was bored in Avondale, and in her dreams she lived the exciting life of the movie heroines. The only real excitement in Avondale was speeding with Bud, and exulting in the knowledge that her boy could drive faster and better than anyone else. When they were speeding, taking risks and courting danger, she was frightened, but thrilled. And so she craved speed and danger because it made her seem like the screen heroines she envied.

LaVerne knew that Bud had suffered a loss of prestige because she had gone out with Walt and because he had called off the run to Trenton. To her, it was a simple matter to restore Bud to his former high place. First she would make it obvious that she was Bud's girl, and secondly, see that he made the speed run. They'd go together, and that would solve everything, plus giving her the biggest thrill of her life.

"Hello, Bud," LaVerne said softly.

Bud started. He had been deep in dreams of engineering school, and hadn't heard LaVerne approach. He pushed his ridiculous hat down on his forehead. "Hello, Squirt." His voice was casual.

"You didn't speak to me once at school today," LaVerne complained.

"Didn't have anything to say." Bud hooked his fingers in his belt and stared past LaVerne. He began whistling a tune.

"You're mad about last night, aren't you?"

Bud stopped whistling. "Nope." He whistled again. He looked away from LaVerne. She was out of his life now, and he wanted to keep her out. He'd learned his lesson, and besides, he had more important things to think about. Like that scholarship. And he looked away because LaVerne could get under his skin before he knew it. If she turned on her charm, he couldn't resist her.



"Bud. . . ." LaVerne moved into his field of vision. She stood prettily, young and lovely in a simple wool dress. Her head was back, her eyes appealing, her red lips slightly parted. "Let's not quarrel, Bud."

"I'm not quarreling," Bud said. "Did I say anything?"

"It's the way you're acting."

"What do you want me to do?" Bud asked with sudden bitterness. "Shout for joy because you went out with Walt Thomas?"

"I know what you're thinking, and I ought to be angry," LaVerne said, taking the offensive. "Walt did take Marge and me for a ride, but that's nothing to be mad about. Marge was along all the time."

"Uhhuh," Bud grunted. He tried to sound cold, but he wanted to believe her.

"Marge and I rode in the back seat together," LaVerne explained. "Then Walt parked and got in back with us. Just then . . . some car came along. I made Walt take us right home. I was so mad at him. . . ."

"Walt's been doing a lot of bragging," Bud said.

"He's been bragging about other things, too," LaVerne said quickly. "About *your* being chicken. Everybody believes that."

"It's not true," Bud said angrily. "I'll show that big. . . ."

"Sure you will," LaVerne said quickly. "I knew you would. He'll shut up when you make the run."

LaVerne breathed an inner sigh of relief. Bud was hers again, and now all she had to do was talk about the speed run. Once it was made, and Bud was the town hero again, everything would be all right. She needed Bud. He was her way to California and the movies.

Bud shook his head. "I meant what I said, LaVerne. No run."

"But Bud," she wailed. "You have to do it. If you don't,

they'll think you're chicken. How do you think that would make me feel?"

"I'm not chicken," Bud grumbled. "But there are more important things in life than trying to show up Walt Thomas."

"More important than protecting your reputation . . . and mine?"

"I can't tell you now," Bud said. "But it's real important. It might mean a whole new future for us."

"A new future . . . for us . . . ?" LaVerne moved closer to Bud. She had to know.

"I can't tell you all about it yet," he said, resting one long leg on the front bumper of his car. "But if I keep out of trouble on the road I've got a chance to win an engineering scholarship."

"Oh." LaVerne was faced with a sudden challenge to her acting ability. She thought quickly of how her favorite stars would play the same role, and tried to do the same. "That's wonderful for you, Bud," she said huskily. "I wish you all the luck in the world."

"It's wonderful for *us*," Bud corrected her. "You're going with me."

LaVerne shook her head. Not self-pityingly, but yet with an air of sacrifice. "You won't need me, Bud. You can't take a wife to college."

"Why not?" Bud demanded. "Lots of married fellows go to school. And when I graduate, it won't be Avondale and this garage. It will be a real job in some big place, like Detroit."

And if that happened, LaVerne thought, there would be no Hollywood chance for her. Bud wasn't lost yet, but he might be. In that case she'd have to try someone else. My-Son-Ralph, or even Walt. She'd fight first to keep Bud. If he didn't get his scholarship, he'd be dissatisfied enough to head for California.

"I'll wait for you, Bud," LaVerne promised with a touch of sadness. "I'll be here whenever you want me."

"If I go, you go," Bud said scowling. "There are too many people around here who'd try to keep you from being lonely."

"Oh, Bud, are you still worrying about Walt Thomas? I dislike him as much as you do. It just drives me wild to hear him bragging about the way he made you back down. No girl likes to see her boy friend made to look like a fool. If you could only make that run and shut him up for good. . . ."

"I'd like to," Bud said viciously.

"Then why don't you? Nothing will happen to spoil your scholarship, will it?"

"If I get caught it would."

"You won't get caught," LaVerne argued. "Who's going to catch you? Who could?"

Bud looked at his car, and the reckless grin touched his lips. "Nobody could catch me if I didn't want to be caught."

"I know it. Then why take Walt's brags? You know how the kids at school feel. They think you're . . . yellow. You don't have to live with that, Bud."

"Not if I don't want to," Bud was weakening.

"Then let's do it, Bud. Afterwards you can give up driving if you want to, and nobody could say a word. Let's show them."

Bud stared at the floor. Maybe LaVerne had the answer. If he made that run quietly, nobody would know about it until it was over. Then, having won back his place in the eyes of his friends, he could forget speed, and concentrate on winning the Rodeo.

The more Bud thought about it, the more right LaVerne seemed to be. It galled him to have the others think he was chicken, when he knew he could make good his

boast. And actually, he could best help Mr. Cole if he made the Trenton run. After he made the run the fellows would all respect him again, and then if he even took driver training, they wouldn't be able to laugh. Then they'd really come in.

Yes, that was the answer. Make the run, win everybody's respect, and then lead them into driver training. Afterwards he would probably win the Roadeo, and get the scholarship. He and LaVerne could get married before he left.

LaVerne was a good kid, all right. When all the others let him down she stuck with him, and was trying to help him win back his rightful place.

"LaVerne," Bud said suddenly, "can you change clothes and be back here in less than twenty minutes?"

"Change . . . ?"

"You don't want to make the run in your good clothes, do you? Get moving, kid. I have to leave in twenty minutes whether you're here or not."

Their excited eyes met. LaVerne nodded eagerly. "I'll make it, Bud. I'll be back in fifteen." She left on the run, her hair flying.

Bud laughed aloud. He was happy. Everything was right. His hop-up was in perfect order; the time was right; the day was right. All he had to do was fill the gas tank and take off. As soon as LaVerne returned they'd be on their way. He and LaVerne. The two of them against the world.

Bud patted the fender of his car, laughing again. "Trenton, here we come," he said aloud. And at the thought of the highway and the speed ahead, Bud felt a wonderful nervous thrill in the pit of his stomach. This was it!

## Chapter 4

LAVERNE ran home as fast as skirts would let her. She knew Bud. If he said he would leave in twenty minutes, he would leave at that time, whether she was back or not. And she had to be back. She couldn't miss this adventure. She knew how much talk there would be when Bud made the run, and she wanted to be part of the talk. She wanted the feminine lead in whatever action lay ahead.

LaVerne ran up to her room, pulling off her clothes as she went up the stairs. Inside her room she stood in the middle of the floor and threw her clothes aside heedlessly. She put on a pair of blue denim slacks, a sweatshirt, and a red jacket. Then she tied a scarf over her head and paused before the mirror to take a precious moment to put on lipstick.

LaVerne's room, like herself, was spiritually removed from the world of Avondale in which both existed. It was a room that tried to escape its fate as a small town bedroom of a small town girl, and masquerade as the dressing room of a Hollywood star.

The pastel drapes and bedspread were rather too frilly and elegant for the sober windows and white-enameled iron bed they draped in order to conceal rather than adorn. On the bed were several dolls. LaVerne didn't care for dolls, but one of her favorite movie stars kept dolls on *her* bed, and LaVerne did the same.

Her "vanity" had been made of orange crates, flanking an old-fashioned mirror, and LaVerne had done her best to simulate the dressing table of a movie star by concealing the crates with flowered cloth, loading the tops with as many variously-shaped bottles of cologne and scent as she had been able to buy at the ten-cent-store in Greenfield, and by framing her mirror with pictures.

The outstanding feature of LaVerne's room was the profusion of pictures. From the walls where they were lined in neat rows, to the table where they stood in folders, to the mirror where they were inserted between glass and molding, pictures of movie stars looked down on LaVerne.

Most of the pictures had been cut from movie magazines; some she had written for. Sincerely autographed to LaVerne (even if she had to write that in) the rows of handsome kings and glamorous queens of the screen looked down on her from all sides. And stacked about the room, in carefully arranged piles, were movie magazines, each thoroughly read and re-read.

And, at once ridiculous and pathetic, from favored places on her walls, *if* masqueraded as is. Carefully situated among the pictures of the stars LaVerne had mounted studio pictures of herself. Pictures with a sultry full-face, or a coy over-the-shoulder look, or a profile, the best results obtainable from a small town photographer with a limited imagination, old equipment, and a single square of black velvet to serve as a drape. And these pictures too, were signed. Signed in lonely rehearsal for the day when LaVerne would be sending out thousands of similar good wishes to her admirers. "Sincerely, LaVerne Godworth," that being the first screen name she had chosen. Another, a later thought, was signed, "With all best wishes, Colette La Verne."

In this dream world LaVerne lived. In Avondale she merely existed, her heart tapping anxiously against her ribs in anticipation of the day when her world would be a Heaven of fame and fortune done, like her room, in two soft shades of pink. From this room she ran out to join Bud.

"LaVerne. . . ."

"I'm in a hurry, Mother."

"Where are you going, child?"

LaVerne hated to be called child. "Riding with Bud."

"All right, dear. Be good."

"Of course. Bye."

LaVerne ran out without seeing her mother, with her mother's farewell in her ears. LaVerne had no father, and her mother, since his death, worked at home, running a small beauty shop. Her mother was always tired, always worried, always wanting to know where she was going. Not that it mattered. Mrs. Shuler never said no. LaVerne was so hard to keep track of, and so willful. It was just too much work to argue with her. She always got her own way in spite of everything. It might be different if she had a father to help enforce discipline, but she hadn't.

Bud filled his tank, checked his oil and battery, and made sure he had the proper amount of air in his tires. Five minutes before he was going to leave he started the motor and let it warm up by idling. He looked down the wide unpaved street and saw LaVerne running back, dressed in slacks and a red jacket. Bud's heart beat faster as he watched her run toward him.

"I'm ready, Bud," she panted, trying to catch her breath.

"Good deal. We'll shove in a minute."

LaVerne got in first, and then Bud went around and slid behind the wheel. "Still time to back out," he said, looking at her excited face.

LaVerne squeezed Bud's arm. "Back out? From a ride like this? Never!"

Bud chuckled, pleased by her spunk. He reached in the glove compartment and pulled out a sheet of paper with a column of writing and figures. "Here," Bud said, taking off his watch and giving it to LaVerne with the paper. "You keep time."

LaVerne looked at the paper. "What is it?"

"My schedule. According to that, we should be heading out of town past the garage in exactly three minutes at forty miles an hour. If you look down the sheet you'll see I've got my time figured out to the second. I've practiced this run plenty."

"I should say," LaVerne breathed, looking over the sheet. "It makes me proud of you, Bud. It must have taken a lot of work."

"It was fun," Bud said. "Okay, kid, here we go."

LaVerne leaned back against the seat as Bud shifted into low. He took off easily, swinging around to head for the north end of Avondale. LaVerne looked at him. "Don't we go south, Bud?"

"Going to the end of the runway for that running start," Bud answered. They bounced through Avondale, and Bud made a U-turn at the end of the street. As they faced south he wriggled in the seat to get a better position behind the wheel, wiped his hands on his trouser legs, and hunched forward.

Bud stabbed the gas pedal while still in low gear and a mighty roar filled the Avondale street. His roadster leaped forward in a shower of dirt like an airplane picking up flying speed on a dirt runway.

Opposite the drug store Bud shifted into second. As they sped past, Jimmy and Kenny looked out, eyes wide. LaVerne leaned out of the window, too thrilled to be quiet. "Trenton!" she shrieked. The two boys yelled an answer that was lost in a cloud of dust and noise.

"On the dot," LaVerne said briefly to Bud as they roared past the garage. She checked the first time notation and added, in pencil, their riding time.

"Next check, the intersection at the highway," Bud said. Still in second gear he roared into the S-turn under the railroad tracks, and went around picking up speed.



Out of the turn he opened up, and his engine was screaming before he shifted quickly into high and headed for Ninety-Mile-Curve.

LaVerne squealed with delight as they raced ahead, the dual pipes blatting deafeningly against the concrete road. "Go, Bud! Go!"

Bud went.

He had a clear road to start on, and was up over ninety in a surge of power. Since this was his last speed run he decided to pick up seconds wherever he could. This was the day he'd take Ninety-Mile-Curve at a hundred. After this they could change its name.

Bud was hitting close to a hundred as he approached the long banked curve. He was all set to take it in stride, and then he yelled his disappointment aloud.

Half-way around the curve ahead, on Bud's side of the road, a farmer was driving down the highway with a team and a loaded wagon. Coming into Ninety-Mile-Curve from the south were three cars, spaced about a hundred yards apart. The lead car was almost to the wagon.

There was only a split-second in which to make a decision, and Bud made it. There wasn't time to pass at a hundred, and Bud didn't dare try it any faster. He pumped his brake, burning rubber beneath him, bellowing angrily at his luck. The stubby red hop-up bucked and swayed as the brakes grabbed, and LaVerne was white-faced as she felt how helplessly they were hurtling at the rear of the wagon.

Bud wasn't helpless. Powerless to pass on the left or stop in time—and reluctant to slow to the wagon's pace anyway—Bud took a chance. He knew the ground was hard alongside the road, and, inside the curve, it was clear. He was down to fifty as he swept up to the slow-moving wagon, and, at the last second he cut sharply to the right. The moment he was off the pavement and on the

hard ground, Bud cut back to his left and poured the power to his motor.

In one whirl of motion Bud was passing the wagon with wheels digging dirt, the farmer was shouting, the two horses, frightened, were rearing, and LaVerne's shrill scream filled the cab of the racing car. Dead ahead, pulling on the highway from a side road, was a black sedan. The driver, half on the highway and half on dirt, heard the roar of Bud's motor and looked over in time to see Bud bouncing past the wagon and about to smash into him. The frightened driver jammed on his brakes and covered his face.

"Damn!" the word exploded as Bud saw the car in front of him come to a halt. He'd expected the other driver to keep going, and get out of his way. Bud pulled his wheel to the left, power on, and headed back on the highway. He bounced over the curb, shot past the nose of the other car, and pulled back into his own lane with screeching tires just in time to avoid a head-on-collision with the third of the three cars he had seen coming from the south. Rocking crazily, Bud kept his power on and pulled his car into a straight line of flight again. LaVerne let out a shuddering sigh of relief.

"I lost time there," Bud said grimly. "Of all the times to run into traffic!"

"I thought we were going to get killed," LaVerne said weakly.

"We didn't. Do you want to quit?"

"N-no, Bud. It's . . . it's exciting once it's over all right."

"Dumb drivers you meet," Bud grunted, shoving his car faster and faster. "Stopping right in front of us."

LaVerne felt secure once more with the highway open. "I'll bet he was surprised to see us coming at him from the right side of the wagon. Did you see him duck?"

"You know who that was, don't you?" Bud asked gloomily.

"I couldn't see."

"Niles Lundgren, president of the board of education."

"Oh."

Bud frowned at the road ahead as he picked up speed. "He's going to town for a meeting about the driver training program. I hope he doesn't tell about this."

"Maybe he didn't recognize us," LaVerne said hopefully.

Bud laughed without mirth. "How could he miss? Everybody knows this heap. It's a jinx run. I ought to call it off and try some other time."

"Don't quit, Bud," LaVerne coaxed. "I'll bring you good luck. We're not very much behind time and the road looks clear now. Don't quit."

Bud squinted over the big white steering wheel. "We'll give it a whirl. How do we stand on time at the intersection?"

LaVerne checked with the time sheet and the watch. "About twenty seconds late."

"And this full stop ahead," Bud said. "I could make up most of that time if there wasn't a stop sign. Road looks clear to the left."

"Clear to the right," LaVerne said.

"I don't like to do this," Bud said, "but if it's clear, I'll make an exception. Here we go." And, instead of slowing to a stop, Bud pushed down on the gas pedal. He roared around the last turn to the left and flashed past the stop sign. When he was on the highway he settled down for the straight ten-mile stretch ahead. Straight, open road, slightly undulating to give a roller-coaster kick to speed. There was no limit on this road. Faster . . . faster . . . faster. . . .

"Bud," LaVerne said timidly.

"Yeah?" He gave her a quick look. His hands were full keeping his rod on the road.

"I told a little lie."

"What about?"

"There was a car coming from my side, but I knew we would get through in time."

"Don't worry about it," Bud said. "Everybody runs a stop sign once in a while."

"I think the car is following us, Bud."

"He won't catch us." Bud glanced in the rear-vision mirror. "Holy Cow!"

"What's the matter, Bud?"

"That car behind us. Highway patrol."

"Oh. . . . Bud!"

"Don't worry, kid," Bud said. "He's a good half a mile behind. He'll never catch us."

LaVerne stared out of the rear window. "He is catching us, Bud."

"He won't. How's our time?"

"Right on the nose, Bud."

Bud laughed. "He won't catch us. You'll see."

The patrol car gained slowly, perhaps a foot for every hundred the two cars covered. Bud kept glancing in his rear-vision mirror, and smiling tightly. "How much after?" he asked.

LaVerne checked. "Twenty-two minutes and fifteen seconds."

"Hear anything?"

"Like what?"

"Like a train."

LaVerne listened, looking at Bud with a puzzled expression on her face. "Yes," she said suddenly. "I hear it. It's . . . the Rocky Mountain Rocket."

Bud coaxed another five miles an hour from his motor. "Here's where we lose the patrol."

"Bud. . . . The train. . . . Be careful, Bud."

"Don't worry," he muttered. "I've got it all figured."

They bore down on the railroad crossing, traveling with the speed of wind. From their right came the long-drawn warning horn of the Rocket, a train that crossed the road at ninety miles an hour.

"Good old Rocket," Bud said. "Always on time."

The railroad crossing lights began flashing a red signal, and long black-and-white striped gates came down from their vertical resting positions like the necks of giraffes stooping to drink. LaVerne whimpered.

Bud increased his speed as the gates came down to block his way. He hit the tracks and almost flew over the rough crossing. He got across just as the gates dropped into place, and seconds later the silver train raced by behind him, its horn blasting angrily.

"There," Bud said. "Told you we'd lose the patrol. By the time the gates are up and he gets going, we'll be out of sight."

LaVerne's face was still white. "The chance you took, Bud. It wasn't worth it. We might have been hit."

"Not a chance. The only thing that worried me, I thought the train might be late. I told you I had this figured. I timed that train for a week straight, just in case we were chased. And I figured it right."

"I thought you were taking a chance," LaVerne said.

"Me take a chance? Never. I figure everything. That's why we'll make it."

LaVerne smiled. "I ought to know I could trust you, Bud. You don't do anything foolish like . . . like the others do."

"I did one foolish thing," Bud said. "I shouldn't have run that stop sign. If I get a ticket for that, I won't be able to compete in the Roadeo. I should have stopped."

"What's the Roadeo?"

"Something. I meant to stop. That bothers me."

"It will be all right," LaVerne said. "Don't worry about it."

"Too late to worry," Bud answered. "Nothing to do but keep rolling."

And he rolled.

The squat little car roared through mile after mile. Bud forgot everything but the driving task at hand. Again and again he floated up behind cars, gave them the horn, and went by in a rush of speed. A few tried to race with him, but the races were short-lived. Those who could hang on along the straight-aways lost Bud on the turns. He went on, slowing for nothing.

The importance of the speed run forced Bud to do several things he didn't like. One was passing the stop sign. Others came up on the highway. Rather than slow down, he passed slow-moving trucks going up hills, even when he had to disregard the no-passing signs. Each time that happened he took a deep breath, hoped no one was coming, and roared around the obstacle. He was lucky. He didn't meet anyone coming from the other direction.

They flashed by a sign announcing the town of Harn-ton, speed limit twenty-five miles an hour. Bud slowed to fifty as he came into the town, and, as everything was quiet in the little village, he went back up to seventy.

"That was easy," he said, breaking a long silence. "It will be a little tougher to get through Blairsville."

LaVerne nodded. The first thrill of speed was wearing off after so many uneventful miles. Running between eighty and a hundred seemed ordinary. She was tired, and wished the run were over.

Back on the open highway Bud resumed his normal terrific speed. So far everything was fine. The mill was turning without a whisper, and nothing was falling off.

The run seemed a cinch now. Bud relaxed a little, passing cars in his way with smooth efficiency. "How we coming?" he asked.

LaVerne sighed. She had been staring ahead unseeingly, day-dreaming about being an actress. She glanced at the watch and sheet of paper in her lap. "All right. On time." She yawned, and the monotony of speed took over.

"Blairsville," Bud said in a few minutes. "Are we still on the nose? I'll have to creep through this town."

"All right," LaVerne said sleepily. "All . . . No, I made a mistake, Bud. I read it wrong. We're a minute late."

"What?" Bud bawled disgustedly. "A fine help you are. A minute late . . . And I loafed coming in. Oh . . . nuts!"

He reached up and pulled his hat down over his forehead. Then he loosened the zippers in the sleeves of his black leather jacket where they were too tight around his wrists. "We'll have to blast through here, too," Bud grumbled. "Keep an eye out for cops."

They raced through the first streets without interruption, and reached the business section, which was clustered around a town square. Working his gas and brakes when needed, Bud roared and blasted and churned his way around slow-moving traffic, drove on-coming cars off to the side, and left a trail of dust and angry drivers behind him. In a few moments he was through and leaving town.

"The town police car is after us," LaVerne said, looking back.

"We'll lose him in two minutes," Bud answered. But it didn't look too easy. Traffic was heavier on this side of Blairsville, both coming and going, and as Bud slowed

to await his passing opportunities, the police car, siren wailing, gained on him.

There was no other way out. Bud opened up. He swept around the car ahead, ducked in to avoid an oncoming car, and made his tires smoke as he took off in the clear. A moment later the police car was also in the clear, and coming fast. Bud wheeled into a series of turns, his car rocking and tires screeching as he took them faster than he wanted to. He was glad for his anti-sway bar and canted springs. He didn't think the law could match him on turns.

But the law hung on, grimly, the siren an order for Bud to halt. Bud took a better grip on the wheel and went on, faster. He couldn't allow himself to be caught. If he was, there went the Rodeo, the chances for his scholarship. He glanced fleetingly at LaVerne. She was fully awake now, watching the road, her hands clenched until the knuckles were white. Her face looked thin and eager, and there was a wild light in her eyes. It was her fault. If she hadn't coaxed him. . . .

Bud charged into a turn and caught up with another car. As he pulled out to pass, he saw another car coming at him. This was no time to drop back and give the law a chance. Bud pushed the gas pedal to the floor and see-sawed around the turn, heading right at the approaching car. The other driver chose the ditch to a head-on collision—just as Bud had figured, and went off the road. Bud sped on without looking back. LaVerne looked. He heard her gasp.

"What happened?"

"That car . . . It went over on its side. The police are stopping for it."

"Look bad?"

"N . . . no."

"How's our time now."



"We're making it back. Only thirty seconds slow."

"Are you *sure*?"

"I'm sure."

"All right. Here's where we make back that thirty."

The road was open and clear once more, with good long stretches of straight road. Now or never, Bud figured. He poured on the coal and went up over a hundred, until he was running at better than a hundred and ten. That was about all he could get on these stretches, because he had to slow and brake for turns. He went into his turns burning rubber, and came out deafeningly, putting every horse to work. He made back the thirty seconds before they reached Holcomb.

The police were waiting for him at Holcomb. Word had evidently been sent ahead, and as Bud approached the town he was flagged by a local policeman standing beside a police car.

Bud pumped his brakes gently, his narrowed eyes taking in every detail. As the policeman on foot flagged him another cop in the car drove ahead, so that the police car blocked the road.

LaVerne looked at Bud with dismay as he slowed. They were caught. It was all over; Bud had failed to make the run, and worse than that, he was about to be arrested. LaVerne felt sick. The excitement and glory were gone, and fear moved in.

Bud was going very slowly now, driving straight at the police car in evident surrender. They were close enough to see the grim faces of the policemen watching them come on. Bud cut his speed again, and the policeman on foot turned to say something to the other one behind the wheel. It was the moment Bud had been waiting for.

Before the police realized that Bud wasn't going to stop, he was on his way. He drove off the highway and went around the police car with his foot on the floor-

board, his back wheels sending out a shower of dirt and gravel. In another moment he was back on the road, and he knew there wasn't another car in the state that could match his rate of acceleration.

LaVerne, looking out of the back window, screamed, a sound Bud scarcely heard over the roar of his straining motor.

LaVerne ducked down, her black hair disordered. She cowered against the seat. "*Bud! They're shooting at us!*" As LaVerne screamed her warning something tore through the back of the cab, near the top. Bud looked in his rear vision mirror and saw the cop on the ground shooting, while the one in the car was swinging around violently, pointing after Bud.

Bud's answer to the bullet was the same as his answer to everything else in his way—more speed. He was glad now he had practiced rocking. As he raced into Holcomb he rolled his car from one side of the road to the other. At the rate he was travelling, he would out-run even bullets in a matter of seconds. Only a lucky shot from a pistol would hurt him.

He stopped rocking from side to side when he saw the policeman jump into the police car as it came after him. Bud was grim, and angry. Shooting, were they? He'd show them. Shooting, as though he were an escaped murderer or something. Shooting, just because he was driving fast!

There were traffic lights in Holcomb, but Bud didn't care about them. Behind him the police siren was shrieking loud enough to be heard all over town. Bud pressed down on his horn ring and kept it down. The horn and the siren worked together. Motorists on the streets heard the two sounds and stopped. Bud tore past intersections at top speed, noticing the amazed looks on the faces of the people who gaped at his progress. In spite of the

tense situation he felt elated, and proud. They were seeing something. They'd remember this run.

Out of Holcomb and on the open road again. The police car tried to hang on. Bud's hatred of the police came back. Shoot at him would they? If he weren't in a hurry he'd fix them. He could run them right off the road. He knew how. Some day he'd get even with the Holcomb cops. Just wait.

He out-ran them. The Holcomb police chased him for five miles, but they couldn't get within shooting or any other range. Bud grinned wickedly as he saw them give up. He was showing them all, today. Nothing could stop him.

Speed. More speed. Bud streaked along the highway at the maximum speed he dared travel. Thirty minutes . . . he'd make Trenton in twenty-nine. It wouldn't be long now. Only a few more miles. A few easy miles.

"Bud. . . ." LaVerne sounded troubled.

"Yeah?"

"Do you think the police will be waiting for us at Trenton?"

"Probably."

"What are you going to do?"

"Keep rolling."

"Wouldn't it be better to turn off before we get there? Anyone could tell you'd make it now. There wouldn't be any argument."

"You don't know Walt," Bud said. "If I stopped short he wouldn't pay off."

"Is that worth getting arrested for? Maybe shot?"

Bud whipped past a truck. "Too late to turn back now, LaVerne. We're in deep. Might as well finish it out."

"But we'll be caught . . . arrested. . . ."

"Maybe."

"They'll be waiting for us," LaVerne whispered.

"I can just see the headlines," Bud said. "Hot rod driver and girl captured by police after running gun battle."

"What will my mother. . . ." LaVerne began.

"Do you care? You never seemed to before. You'll get your picture in the paper. Maybe some movie scout will see it and sign you up."

Bud was being sarcastic, but LaVerne missed that. What Bud said made sense. Her picture would be in the papers, and maybe some movie scout would see it. There would be a lot of publicity. She'd be famous. LaVerne, anticipating capture, hunted in her jacket pocket for a lipstick.

"They don't have us yet," Bud said. "And we won't be easy to catch. As soon as we hit Trenton, and I've won the bet, the fun will start."

"Start!"

"I have to turn around and get back to work, don't I?"

"Even if we get away, Bud. They'll be watching the highway."

"We're not taking the highway. I figured we might be chased. We're taking the back roads home. We can lose them in the country. I know those roads."

"They'll catch us anyway, Bud," LaVerne said wearily. "Let's not run any more. If they chase us, let's not run. I'm afraid."

"You started with me; you'll finish with me," Bud said grimly. He wasn't going to quit for anything. He was in now, all the way in. His plan was to get home uncaught, and he wasn't going to get caught.

The chase was on, all right, and Bud liked it. The Rodeo, the possible scholarship—these seemed faint and far away. What was real and strong and immediate was the chase, the challenge to his skill. He was driving a rod

he had built himself, a rod that could out-dig and out-run anything on wheels in the state. And behind the wheel sat himself, Bud Crayne, who could handle this speed and power. Let them catch him if they could! He was excited, maybe a little scared, and very tense. But he welcomed the challenge and the chase. For once, in his dull life, something was happening!

Bud looked over at LaVerne. She seemed to have caught some of his spirit. She was leaning forward, her eyes searching the road ahead for some sign of trouble. Pale, breathless, her hands clenched as they barreled toward trouble, she looked lovely. Bud wanted to pull her to him and kiss her, but he didn't let go of the wheel. The police were ahead, and might pop up in front of him at any moment. When they did, he'd be busy.

A few scattered houses appeared along the road, and ahead they could see the outlines of a town, and the silhouette of a water tower against the sky. Trenton. A sign announcing the city limits of Trenton loomed up on the right. "Time this," Bud said tightly.

As they roared past the sign LaVerne cried out, "Got it!" She figured rapidly. "Twenty-nine minutes and ten seconds. Bud, you made it in *under* thirty minutes. You darling!"

At that moment of triumph Bud felt an exultation he had never known before. Leaning back, pushing his hat back, he opened his mouth and let out a long, shrill whoop of victory. LaVerne leaned over and threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

"Hey, you'll wreck us," Bud protested, but he was pleased. They were a team, all right. "Let's watch out for cops. It's getting dark, and they might be hard to see."

LaVerne looked out again. "I don't see anyone. Turn around, Bud, and let's start back."

"Seems funny," Bud said, frowning. The cops were up to something, yet the road ahead into Trenton seemed clear.

"I'll turn at the next road," he said. "We'll hit a back road that will lead us home." He pumped his brakes gently, warily ready to turn off and start home.

It was a good thing Bud looked ahead. Before he turned, while his left hand was far over on the wheel, he looked down the dirt road. And far down, where he saw them by luck, were the cops! They had figured he'd turn, and the back roads were blocked.

Bud didn't hesitate. He turned his wheels straight and headed into Trenton, his motor thundering once more. "Not so easy, boys!" Bud shouted. "Not so easy!" With power on, he raced toward the heart of Trenton, and its streets heavy with traffic.

## Chapter 3

FIRST the citizens of Trenton heard a noise that sounded as though the Indianapolis 500-mile race was detouring through their town. A moment after the noise came the car, and when some of the people saw it, they wanted to laugh. It was like hearing the voice of the tiger, then seeing the face of a kitten.

Twisting, skidding, motor roaring and horn blaring, Bud bulled his way into the heart of the city with the police on his heels again. Some whom he passed hated him, some were frightened, some angry and some envious. It was a chase, and a chase was exciting. And, as in all chases, some cheered the hounds and some the hare.

The chopped-off little hybrid coupe darted through the streets, snarling its way past traffic and screeching around corners. Behind it came the police, rocking and weaving in angry pursuit.

It was a desperate, anxious, but proud race that Bud ran. No matter what the people he passed thought of the speeding car with the boy and girl inside, Bud had to get away. He didn't want to be caught by strange police. He wanted to make good his boast that no one could catch him.

He roared down the main street, turned to the right, turned to the left, doubled back on his trail and hunted new avenues. All the while the police came after him, following his trail by the backwash of stunned motorists and staring pedestrians in his wake.

He wrestled with his wheel, purposely leading the police in long straight chases, then hooking tight turns that they could not follow without losing speed. Again and again he lured them with a straight run, then went into a series of fast turns that lost them.

Desperate, yes. His hands were sweaty on the wheel, his heart pounded and his mouth was dry. But stronger than his anxiety was a fierce pride that lit his eyes. He hadn't planned it this way, but it had come, and he was proving beyond a doubt that he could out-drive anyone. Word of the run would be all over the state. Everyone would know the name of Bud Crayne, and everyone would know how he drove. That was something they could never take away.

Supremely confident, Bud toyed with his pursuers, leading them through a maze of streets, but always too far ahead to be caught. And when he was ready, when it was dark enough, he moved to lose the police, and go home. He led them through twisting streets, shut off his lights when the going was clear, and escaped them in the darkness.

Driving out of town, heading away from home, he threaded his dark way along winding back roads, and laughed as he heard the confused sirens of his baffled hunters, and saw them by their lights, still hunting for him in town. Then he circled wide, feeling his way along narrow roads, until he was north of Trenton, and on the way home.

North of Trenton, Bud worked his way back to the main highway again. When he was on concrete, he flicked on his bright lights and sent his little car hurtling through the night.

LaVerne stirred. "I thought you were going to stay off the highway."

"I don't want to be too late for work."

LaVerne sighed. "We made it, didn't we?"

"I said I would."

"You were wonderful, Bud. It was just like a movie."

"Yeah."

"Bud . . ." There was a note of alarm in LaVerne's



voice. "Aren't we coming into Holcomb?"

"Right."

"They're the ones who shot at us, Bud."

"Right."

"Then why look for trouble here?"

"I aim to give these Holcomb cops one more run for their money," Bud said grimly in the darkness. "After what's happened today, I may lose my license to drive. But before I do, I'll fix these birds for taking a shot at us."

"Bud . . ."

"My mind's made up." There was no disputing him.

He slid into Holcomb quietly, at a normal pace, until he was a block from the police station. Then he stepped on it, and headed past the police station wide open in second gear. The noise was deafening. As Bud reached the police station he blew several defiant blasts with his horn, and gunned away.

As he expected, the Holcomb police gave chase. He slowed down until he saw their flashing red light behind him, and heard the thin wail of their siren. Then he opened up, enough to lose them. Just outside of town he hit the dirt roads again, with the police car in hot pursuit.

"I'll get them good," Bud muttered, fighting the wheel as he rammed over ruts and holes in the road.

He swung north, along a road that had been gravelled, and increased his speed. He went up to seventy, feeling as though he would fly off the road at any moment. The police came on.

"Hang on, LaVerne," Bud warned. "We're going to lose these boys in a minute."

"How? . . ."

"Never mind. Grab something. I mean hang on good."

LaVerne obeyed, watching Bud's grim profile in the

darkness. He had some plan. He always had some plan.

The police car gained, but Bud held at seventy. LaVerne sensed that Bud was getting ready for an exceptional maneuver, but she was afraid to ask.

"Get ready for a square turn," Bud said quietly. "To the left."

LaVerne's fingers dug for support.

"At seventy," Bud said softly. "This road comes to a dead end up ahead. It's being repaired, and there's a barricade. Another road crosses at the barricade, back to the highway. We're taking the turn and losing the cops."

LaVerne didn't want to look, but she had to. In a moment their lights picked up a plank barricade set on two steel barrels. An arrow marked Detour reflected their lights in red dots. LaVerne's mouth opened, but no sound came.

Bud headed straight for the barricade at seventy, until it seemed he had to smash through it. But at the last fraction of a second he acted with swift, sure movements.

As Bud's foot came off the accelerator and hit his brakes hard, he spun the big white wheel to the left. Then, as fast as he could move his right foot he jammed it back on the gas pedal. The stubby little car spun to the left, the rear wheels gouging furrows in the earth road as the rear end skidded toward the barricade. For a long second the hop-up traveled sideways, threatening to overturn, and then with the wheels spinning powerfully, the skid was checked, and the little car shot ahead, clawing its way back on the road.

Bud wasn't out of the way a moment too soon. The police car bore down on him as he turned, and the policeman driver, taken by surprise, hit his brakes, confused. The police car swayed violently as it skidded to the turn, and, as the driver tried to follow Bud, the patrol car went off the road and bounced into the fields, finally

bumping to a halt. Only a cloud of dust settling in the dark showed where Bud had made his almost impossible turn.

He was in the clear. He kept his eyes on the narrow country road ahead, but LaVerne told him what had happened to the police. When he heard they were off the road, ditched, Bud felt he had his revenge. "That'll teach them to go shooting at people," he boasted to LaVerne. "And it will teach them that if I don't want to get caught, I don't get caught."

LaVerne stretched, her hands in the pockets of her red jacket. She put her feet on the dash and crossed her ankles. "What now, Bud?"

"What do you mean?"

"They'll come after you."

"Yeah."

"You wouldn't have to get caught."

"Meaning what?"

"Let's not go back to Avondale," LaVerne said. "Let's go to California, Bud. We could get married on the way. Then we'd never have to worry about getting caught. We could have a lot of fun in California. Let's not go back, Bud."

"Crazy idea," Bud said. "What would we do in California?"

"You could get a job," LaVerne said. "Any garage would be glad to take you. And I could work, too."

"Doing what?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe as an extra in the movies."

"You've got movies on the brain," Bud said. "We're going back home." He was silent, but he thought about what LaVerne had said. She knew enough to be quiet, and give her idea a chance.

Once more Bud turned back to the main highway, but as he was making a cautious approach, he heard a siren,

and a state patrol car went north. Bud turned around at a farmyard. "They're still after us on the highway," he told LaVerne. "Our only chance is sticking to the back roads. I'll be too late to work tonight."

That thought depressed him. Now that the run was over, and pursuit eluded, there was a letdown. Now that he could review the hectic time they had gone through he felt a sense of futility. So he had made the run and won ten dollars from Walt Thomas—so what? Look what he'd lost doing it. In a moment of anger and pride and . . . jealousy . . . he'd made a fast, stupid decision. He'd made good his boast and wrecked his chances for a decent future.

The cops were after him. If they didn't catch him on the road they would catch him after he stopped. There would be a list of charges as long as his arm. He'd be jailed, fined, and forbidden to drive. He was out of the Rodeo, his chances to win a scholarship were dead. He'd lost everything, just because he was afraid of being called chicken.

The only thing—he couldn't help a twisted smile at the thought—he had really shown them how he could drive. That was one thing they couldn't take away. The story of his run might even get national publicity. If it did, it would help him get a job in California. That was a hot rod state. He could probably get some outfit to back him, and he could go into track racing. Maybe LaVerne wasn't so far off the beam at that. Taking a chance on California was better than taking the rap in Avondale.

"Do you think we could do it?" Bud asked.

"Sure, Bud. We could lie about our ages, and get a justice of the peace to marry us. We'd start a new life together in California."

"We could drive out," Bud said. "But that takes dough."

Tell you what, LaVerne. I'll drop you off at home so you can get some clothes. I've got some money at home, and Jake owes me for a week. I'll get the money, gas up, and meet you at your house. Okay?"

"Okay," LaVerne breathed. "Okay."

It was late when Bud slipped into Avondale. The town was dark and quiet. He let LaVerne out at her house, then headed for home to get his money and clothes. He was out again in ten minutes without waking anyone, and drove to the garage.

To prevent his car from being seen accidentally, Bud used his key to open the garage and drove inside. He closed the door behind him and filled his tank from a couple of full gas cans. He checked his oil, water and tires, and was all set to go. One last thing remained. To get his pay from the cash register. He'd leave a note for Jake, so Jake wouldn't think he'd been robbed.

Leaving his car, Bud eased out of the garage and walked across the gravel area to the service station building. He unlocked the door. In five minutes he and LaVerne would be on their way.

Bud closed the door behind him and started toward the cash register. Half-way across the room he froze as the lights went on.

"Hello, Bud. We were waiting for you."

Bud turned at the sound of a familiar voice. Standing by the light switch, their faces grave, were Ted O'Day and Mr. Cole.

Bud flashed a quick look at the door, but the highway patrolman stepped in front of it. "Relax, Bud," he advised. "It's all over. The run is over."

Bud looked at the two men. A sudden heaviness gripped his arms and legs. He looked down at his booted feet. "Yeah," he said. "I guess it's all over . . . now."

"Sit down, Bud," Ted O'Day said firmly. "We want to have a little talk with you."

Bud sat down, his head hanging, his arms on his knees.

"Look up!"

Bud looked up slowly, blinking. O'Day's face was angry. "Look up," O'Day repeated in a hard voice. "I don't want you sitting there with your head hanging like a naughty little boy caught stealing cookies. You're going to take this like a man, with your head up."

Bud reddened, but he kept his head up. He was waiting for the lecture that would precede his going to jail. They'd want to know why he did it, bawl him out, and then take him away.

"Now, Bud," the big highway patrolman continued in a softer voice, "we're not going to ask why you did it. We know."

Bud's eyes widened a little, but he didn't answer. He nervously zipped and un-zipped his left jacket sleeve.

"We know all about it," O'Day said. "But you let us both down, Bud. You let us down hard."

"What could I do?" Bud said. "Guys calling me chicken, and Walt bragging, and LaVerne. . . ."

"Come off it, Bud!" the usually mild Mr. Cole exploded. "Don't you think we were ever seventeen? Do you think a little razzing from your friends and a cow-eyed look from your girl is an excuse for murder?"

"Murder. . . ?" Bud felt sick.

"It wasn't, but it could have been," O'Day said. "I've got a complete record of your run, Bud. I still don't see how you managed to avoid killing half a dozen people. As it was, you ran cars off the road, caused the Holcomb police to get stalled in the country. . . ."

"They shot at me," Bud said. "I was afraid to stop. They didn't have any right to shoot."

O'Day looked angry again. "Look here," he said, strid-

ing up to Bud. "I don't want any mealy-mouthed excuses out of you. Sure they shot at you. They told you to stop and you didn't. For all they knew, you'd just robbed a bank. Believe me, Bud, when a cop tells you to stop, you stop. No matter what you've done, you really aren't in trouble until you start running from the law. You knew what you were doing, and we know you did. Understand?"

"All right," Bud said, stung to anger. "I knew what I was doing. I showed them they couldn't catch me. I showed everybody. Okay!"

"Okay," O'Day repeated. "Now we're getting somewhere."

"I thought I had everything figured," Bud went on. "I'm not trying to make excuses. Mr. Cole, you said the kids looked up to me, and would come into driver training if I did. Well, you were wrong. They thought I was chicken. I figured if I made the run, I'd really be able to get them into driver training."

Mr. Cole groaned. "Bud, of all the stupid reasons to burn up the highway . . . There won't be any driver program. You fixed that. I got up before the meeting and told them what wonderful news I had, that Bud Crayne was going to help in the course. Mr. Niles Lundgren got up with a purple face and told how you had almost killed him on his way into town, and as far as *he* was concerned, he was going to see that young people were kept out of cars, rather than spend money to get more of them driving. And that took care of driver training."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Cole," Bud said.

Mr. Cole snorted. "Sorry! Wait, Bud, wait. You'll have cause to be sorry. We'll all be sorry when it's too late. When we see who dies because you helped kill driver training."

"I'm sorry," Bud said again. "And I'm willing to take my medicine."

"Bud," Mr. Cole said, "while you were out terrorizing the highway, where do you think O'Day and I were?"

Bud looked at them silently.

"We were at Judge Martin's," Mr. Cole continued, "wearing out his carpet with our knees, begging to keep you out of jail, where he wanted to throw you as soon as you could be brought to earth."

A stubborn look came into Bud's eyes. "I don't want any favors, Mr. Cole. I'll take what's coming to me."

"Listen, Bud," O'Day cut in. "I don't know why, but Mr. Cole and I think we can do more good with you out of jail than in. It's not because we love you, my boy, but we're trying to do a job."

"We could pop you in jail, fine you, and take away your license, and you'd be punished. But you'd still feel that you had shown us all where to get off. You and your kind of driving would be big stuff around here, and you'd be a hero because you weren't caught on the road. The more you were punished, the more the kids would think we were picking on you because we couldn't catch you. I know how kids think. That's why Judge Martin agreed to put your case aside for six months and let Mr. Cole and myself assume responsibility for you. Do you know what that means? There won't be anything against your record for six months . . . if you play ball."

"The Rodeo," Bud said slowly. "I could be in the Rodeo."

"Maybe," Mr. Cole said. "Frankly, Bud, we hope the Rodeo will be your punishment. Until tonight, we wanted you in the Rodeo to win. Now we want to make sure you take part because we want you to lose. The only way to get any sense into your head and the heads of those who admire you, is to prove for once and for all



that your kind of driving isn't any good. And we'll show that by giving you a chance to do your best, and beating you at your own game, behind the wheel."

"Here's the chance you have," O'Day added. "You have to promise that you will not drive or even ride in an automobile as a passenger until the county Roadeo takes place. If you think that will hurt your chances, and you want to practice driving, there is a way out. The only exception to the rule is that you can drive a car only with Mr. Cole or myself along, instructing you. And the car will be marked with a sign warning other motorists that it is a training car, with a beginning driver at the wheel."

Bud understood now that jails and fines weren't the only punishments. Some things could be worse, and what O'Day and Cole suggested was worse. Imagine him driving around with a sign on his car that he was a beginner! Driving with an instructor, as though he'd never been in a car before! After what he'd shown them on the Trenton run? Never! Jail wouldn't be as hard to face as the ridicule.

"You could win the Roadeo with training," Mr. Cole said. "If you swallow your pride and face your mistakes honestly, we can straighten you out. If you don't take training, Bud, you'll be whipped."

Bud thought quickly. His competition would be the kids he knew. There wasn't one that could touch him when it came to driving. Who was there to beat him? No one. O'Day and Cole were trying to stampede him into giving up.

"I won't be whipped by anyone around here," Bud said. "And I can stay away from the wheel for six months and still win."

"All right, Bud," O'Day said with a look at Mr. Cole. "If that's the way you feel, that's the way it will be. Just

remember this. If you touch a wheel or even ride in a car, the deal is off, and the charges will be brought against you immediately. We want you in that Roadeo, Bud. When you get beaten on the track, maybe we'll be able to do something with the other kids."

Now that he was out with a whole skin, Bud felt better. "Who's going to beat me?"

Mr. Cole smiled. "Anyone we want to beat you. Bud, we're going to rub it in. We're going to pick some boy or girl who doesn't drive, and by Roadeo time we'll send them out in competition to cut you down to size. If you think you'd get razzed for taking training yourself, just wait until you're licked by that kind of competition."

Bud tugged at the bottom of his black leather jacket. "All right," he said. "I appreciate what you've done for me. I give you my word I'll not drive or ride until the Roadeo. But I won't take instruction. I think my brand of driving is as good as any that's taught. I'll stick to it, and we'll see at the Roadeo who's right."

The two men were ready to leave. Mr. Cole looked at Bud and shook his head. "You think you're getting off easy, Bud. I know you do. But you've just let yourself in for a hard time. I hope you're man enough to take it when the props are knocked from under you. Because we'll beat you, Bud. We'll beat you because victory is only in your hands, and defeat is under your hat."

Bud's hand went to his hat, and he grinned. "I'd still like to know who's going to beat me?"

"Look in the mirror," Ted O'Day said. "Look in the mirror. Good night, Bud. Think over what we've had to say, and have a nice *walk* home."

Bud walked out with his head up. It was something to be given a chance. He was challenged, and he accepted. They'd see who was right when the issue could be decided behind a steering wheel.

It felt strange to walk home. Bud couldn't remember the last time he'd walked across Avondale. Suddenly he remembered LaVerne, waiting at home for him to pick her up. His first impulse was to detour past her house and explain, but he felt too tired and confused to explain. Let her wait. She could find out later. He turned toward home, trying to understand his new status.

O'Day and Cole watched him go. The big patrolman and the small teacher, who had gone way out on a limb to keep Bud out of jail. They had an idea, and they were risking their jobs to put it over.

"Do you think it will work, Guy?" O'Day asked as they watched the boy walk away in the darkness.

"It has to. It was the only way."

O'Day hooked his thumbs in his belt. "I'll ask you what he asked us. Who is going to beat him on the track? That kid is terrific behind the wheel. He shook me today easily enough."

"He'll beat himself," Cole said. "Just as we told him. He thinks he knows it all, Ted, but he makes mistakes. And he's been practicing his mistakes. His attitude toward driving will beat him unless he submits to new training."

"I hope you're right," O'Day said. "If he wins, we won't be able to show our faces around here."

"He'll lose," Guy Cole said. "He's lost already."

"If he does lose, how do you think he'll take it?"

"Like a man, I hope. If he does, some automobile manufacturer will have a fine engineer one of these days."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Jack Clymer will have a sullen mechanic until Bud kills himself on some back road or other."

## Chapter 6

MY-SON-RALPH OSLER went up in the air and came off the boards in possession of the basketball as a Holcomb player missed his shot. The Avondale fans roared.

Confident, unruffled, in complete control of the ball, the tall, wavy-haired boy dribbled the ball past the middle line into Holcomb territory, giving the Avondale offense time to organize. A Holcomb player tried to take the ball away but Ralph pivoted neatly and passed to Chuck Liddell. As Liddell dribbled across the floor, Ralph slid into place under the basket.

Chuck Liddell moved in closer, the Holcomb guard trying to block his way without fouling him. Liddell was deadly on fast breaks and jump shots. Seeing his way clear, Chuck made a lightning run at the basket. The Holcomb players closed in on him. Chuck went up in the air, as though to shoot, but with his eyes seemingly on the basket, the ball went out at right angles to My-Son-Ralph, whose guard had forgotten him. Ralph, with all the time in the world, tossed the ball through the hoop for another two points. Holcomb called time out.

The Avondale cheer leaders took the floor. LaVerne Shuler was in the center, flanked by two girls on each side. Dressed in dark blue skirts, white sweaters with the maroon A, and white tennis shoes, their faces flushed and their eyes bright, the girls led the wild cheering for the Avondale players. They went down on one knee, leaned back until their long hair brushed the floor, came up with arms imploring for more noise, and ended with a leap that made their full skirts swirl around their knees. Time was called in, and the game went on.

Walt Thomas sat hunched over in the Avondale cheering section and ate popcorn. His eyes followed the plays, he was glad that Avondale was ahead, and he liked being at the game. But he didn't roar or cheer. People around him screamed and pounded each other, but Walt Thomas watched and ate popcorn, one little white ball at a time.

He was out of it. He sat among the students as he had the year before, but he was merely among them, and not of them. Since he had graduated, there seemed to be some invisible wall between him and those yet in school. Last year he had been of them. He had roared cheers, bawled at the officials and mocked the opposition with the loudest voice in the gym. He had been clapped on the back, and his jokes had been laughed at. This year a tall skinny boy with a long nose was the game clown, and he was applauded and laughed at. Walt sat among his former schoolmates and felt that they resented his presence and his attempts at participation in their jokes and noise. He was out, belonged to the past, and a stranger.

The cheer leaders took the floor and Walt watched LaVerne. She whirled and jumped, her intense face happily flushed, her long hair and her skirt flying. She skipped, twirled, swayed and shouted, and all the while Walt watched her, his eyes burning.

"Hey, Walt!" It was the tall skinny boy, taking advantage of a lull. Everyone looked at Walt.

"You paid Bud that ten Walt?" There was a roar of laughter. Walt glared, but said nothing.

The skinny boy looked around, grinning widely. "Bud's going to work his way through college winning bets from Walt," he shouted. There were more shouts and laughs.

Walt stood up. "If you're looking for trouble, I'll give you some," he threatened, moving toward the skinny boy.

The skinny lad pretended great fright and fell into a

mock faint in the arms of his friend. Others shouted at Walt.

"Sit down!"

"Hey, Walt, don't get mad. When lard comes to a boil it melts."

"Sit down."

"Go home!"

Walt sneered and returned to his seat. He was raging inside but he had a plan. Now that Bud was grounded there wasn't anyone who held the driving leadership. He'd take it over. He'd show them that he, Walt Thomas, could handle a car as well as Bud Crayne. He'd do things that would make Bud look sick. He'd show them. They'd be cheering him before he got through. He ignored the noise and shouts and resumed eating popcorn and looking at LaVerne.

Bud Crayne was one of the few people in Avondale not at the basketball game. He kept the service station open, for after the game there would be a rush of business in gasoline. Now the town was deserted, and Bud stood by the gas pumps, thinking.

There wasn't much to Avondale. All the stores along its one street were closed. The only light that showed was at Pop's place. The tavern stayed open until midnight. It was almost deserted now, but Pop would have his share of business after the game.

In the quiet, Bud could hear the crowd roar at the school gym. Avondale was winning. He could tell by the sound. They had a good team this year, and were already being talked up as possible state champions. The little school never had much of a football team, but when it came to basketball it was respected by every team in the state. Ralph and Chuck were widely known players, and had received some good offers from several colleges.

A final tremendous roar indicated the game was over, with an Avondale victory. Bud got ready for business. They'd all be around to tell him about it. Bud smiled. Since the Trenton run the kids really came around. It didn't matter about his being grounded. Most of the fellows felt that the cops didn't have a case, and were punishing Bud because they hadn't been able to catch him. And the fellows never got tired of hearing all the details of the run, and showing their admiration for the way he had driven. One of the town jokes was about who was going to beat Bud at the Roadeo. Everyone knew he would win.

Bud heard motors and saw lights coming. In a moment, half a dozen cars were at the station, and he was getting the details of the game. After the cars, came the kids on bikes. And, like the car drivers, they raced toward the station and slid to a skidding stop.

Two cars appeared at the north end of Avondale and honked their horns. They stopped side by side.

"It's Walt and Ralph," someone shouted. "They're going to have a drag race."

As the boy shouted, Ralph and Walt started going in gears. The object of the race was to start together in low, shift as high as second, and be first in a complete stop at Jake's place.

The two cars leaped forward and roared through Avondale side by side. As they shifted into second, Walt moved ahead by a few feet. He refused to give as they approached the service station, and the watchers scattered. Ralph was the first to ease up, and Walt hit the edge of the gravel wide open. Then he slammed on his brakes and burned rubber as he came to a crazily skidding stop.

"Look at that Walt," someone said admiringly. "He really took My-Son-Ralph."

"Huh!" Bud snorted. "If you think that was something. . . ."

They weren't listening. Bud was grounded, but Walt was still on the road. They crowded around Walt, and Walt loved it. The others could be sports heroes, but as long as he had wheels, he was going to be top dog on the roads.

"Say, fellows," Walt bellowed, "let's have a rat-race. I'll lead."

There was an assenting chorus to this suggestion. The Avondale boys had victory under their belts, and they wanted to celebrate.

"Then we'll run down to Holcomb and razz the folks," Walt went on, his face red with excitement. "They thought they were going to whip us tonight, but we showed them. Let's show them some more!"

There were delighted howls at this, and the boys and girls scrambled into the cars, jumping into the nearest one. In a few moments all the cars were jammed.

Kenny and Jimmy, as excited by the victory and the prospect of more fun as anyone else, ran back and forth along the line of cars begging to be taken along.

"Go home!" Walt bellowed at them. "We don't want you little kids along."

"We're not little!" the boys yelled shrilly, but they were left behind.

Walt signalled the start of the rat-race and was off with wheels spinning. One after another, the rest of the cars followed. They chased one another around the S-turn under the tracks, and out along the highway, toward Ninety-Mile-Curve. Bud watched them go, his hands clenched. The roar of motors was sweet to his ears, and by closing his eyes he could almost imagine himself behind the wheel again, driving.

Bud was left alone with the exception of Jimmy and



Kenny. The two disappointed boys went to Bud for comfort.

"That Walt Thomas," Jimmy said. "It was all his fault."

"Yeah," Kenny chimed in. "He won't let us have any fun. I bet you would have taken us, wouldn't you, Bud?"

"Huh? Oh . . . sure," Bud answered without really hearing what they said.

"We'd sure leave them behind, wouldn't we, Bud?"

"I guess so."

"Shucks," Kenny said sadly. "Everybody else is out having a good time and we have to stick around and not do anything. I wish I had a car."

Bud laughed. "What would you kids do with a car?"

"I can drive," Jimmy said proudly. "I've practiced. I'll bet I could show that Walt Thomas a thing or two if I had a car."

"Sure," Bud said solemnly. "I'll bet you could."

"I want to drive like you, Bud," Jimmy confided. "I want to be as good as you are. I do."

"Thanks," Bud said. "Keep trying, and you will be." He sat down between the gas pumps, glad to have someone he could talk to. "Let me give you some advice, kids, and you'll never go wrong."

The two boys squatted before him in awe, their eyes wide. Boy, getting advice from Bud Crayne! Bud, who had outrun all the cops. . . .

"Whenever you get behind the wheel," Bud said, "I want you to remember this. Always ask yourself what I'd do, and do the same thing. You won't go wrong."

"What would you do, Bud?" Kenny asked. Jimmy silenced his friend with a push.

"I'll tell you my secret," Bud said. "Power, that's it. Nine out of ten people think about their brakes right away. Forget your brakes. The way out of almost any

tight spot is power. Where do you think I'd have been if I'd used my brakes on that Trenton run?"

"They'd have caught you," Jimmy said.

"Sure. Of course, you have to use your head, but whenever you get in a tight spot, think what I'd do. Drive your way out. That's the Bud Crayne way. Drive your way out. Remember that and you can pin Walt Thomas's hide to the barn door any day of the week."

While Bud was talking three people came to the service station on foot. Chuck Liddell, LaVerne, and Marge Anderson. Bud forgot the two small boys.

LaVerne moved around the deserted station, obviously disappointed. "Where's everybody?" she asked Bud.

"Rat-racing," Bud answered. "How was the game?"

"We won," Chuck said. "Not too hard."

LaVerne moved around restlessly. "It sure is dead here," she complained. She was still on fire from the game and craved more action.

"Want a coke?" Bud asked. "I'll stand the bunch."

"No." LaVerne sighed. "I wish we could go riding around like the others." She looked at Bud.

"Don't look at me," Bud said. "If you guys want to ride around, the best I can do is give you the keys to my rod."

"None of us can drive," LaVerne said, irritated. "You know that."

"Sorry."

There was a long silence. Bud and LaVerne hadn't been getting along too well since the Trenton run, and they quarreled easily.

"I don't see any reason to hang around here," LaVerne said. "Let's go home, Marge."

Marge looked at Chuck in the darkness. She hated to leave. "Let's wait a few minutes. They might come back."

"Okay." LaVerne, acting the part of a martyr, agreed to stay.

The others did come back. Still led by Walt, the caravan sped back on the highway and charged pell-mell into the service station grounds. "I need another fuse," Walt bellowed at Bud. "Mine blew again, and I had to out-run these slowpokes in the dark."

Bud didn't argue, but got a fresh fuse. When he came back with a new fuse, Walt went a step further. "Hey, Bud, how about letting LaVerne and Marge and Chuck come along to Holcomb for a ride?"

Bud stepped back, wiping his hands. "I'm not their boss. If they want to go, that's their business." He didn't look at LaVerne, but he hoped she wouldn't go. "Why ask me?"

"That sounds swell," LaVerne said quietly, anxious to be part of a gang once more. "Come on, Marge . . . Chuck . . ."

LaVerne crawled into the back of Walt's Hudson, followed by Marge.

"How about you, Chuck?" Walt demanded. He wanted Chuck along. Chuck had been a hero of the game, and Walt wanted him along while he stole the limelight.

"I don't know," Chuck said. "I don't go in for rat-racing."

"Come on," Walt insisted. "We're all through with that. All we'll do is run to Holcomb and toot our horns over winning. We'll be back soon."

Chuck hesitated. "Well . . ."

"Come on, Chuck," LaVerne called. "You're holding up the parade."

"Okay," Chuck said. "I guess it won't hurt." He climbed in the front seat beside Walt, and in a moment the line of cars was off again, racing south to rub in the defeat they had handed the Holcomb team.

Bud watched them go. He was alone. Even Kenny and Jimmy had disappeared. Nothing to do now, but close up and go home. Walk home. Before he left he went into the garage and looked at his car. He touched the fenders and looked in at the chrome motor. So much power there. So much speed. So much going to waste . . .

Bud turned away and walked home, his hands in his pockets, his hat on the back of his head. Sometimes he felt it would have been easier to go to jail than stay on at work and school and not be able to drive. He could drive if he let O'Day or Cole teach him the driver training way, but that was no fun. He wasn't going to make a fool of himself. Things were bad enough now. He walked on. When he won the county Roadeo it would be different. And, if he could win the state meet. . . . No if about it. He would. He heard the sound of a speeding car. One of the rat-racers, probably. Someone who couldn't drive half as well as he could, yet he was grounded, and others were allowed to drive, and have fun. Bud put his hands over his ears and walked faster.

The Avondale caravan of cars reached Holcomb and toured through the town honking their horns and shouting. Chuck was sorry he had come along. From the very start Walt had driven in a reckless manner, much too fast and too carelessly. And now, in Holcomb, Chuck didn't appreciate crowing over the victory he had helped win. Chuck was a sportsman, and believed in sportsmanship. The Holcomb boys had played hard and clean, and didn't deserve treatment like this after their defeat. It went against Chuck's nature.

He seemed to be the only one who thought that way. The others were having a fine time shouting over the victory, and the cars weaved in and out through the Holcomb streets in a noisy parade.

"All right, Walt," Chuck said, as Walt turned to lead the cars through Holcomb again. "It was only a basketball game. Let's call it quits."

"Calm down, Chuck," Walt said. "We want Holcomb to know they lost."

"Well, you didn't beat them," Chuck came back. "Let's quit this and go home."

"Aah, there always has to be a kill-joy," Walt grumbled. He turned back toward Avondale, trying to think of some way he could make the others forget Chuck's part in the victory.

"Everybody with us?" Walt demanded as he turned. LaVerne counted the cars that followed. "I don't see My-Son-Ralph's car."

"He left just after we got here," Marge Anderson said. "I saw him go."

"That chicken," Walt hooted. "I knew he'd chicken out." Walt headed out of town as fast as he could drive his old car. The steering wheel shook in his hands, and the doors rattled.

"Take it easy, Walt," Chuck cautioned.

"What's the matter? Scared?"

"This is no way to drive at night."

"Look who's giving advice," Walt said loudly. "The only guy who can't drive. What's the matter? Do you want to live forever?"

"I don't want to die now," Chuck replied. It was an honest answer, but it was the wrong one. The others, who had also been somewhat frightened by Walt's driving, felt ashamed that anyone would admit being scared.

"Anybody else shaking in their boots?" Walt asked. "Anybody else want to slow down?" There was no answer, and Walt chuckled. He had an idea. He'd ruin Chuck as far as being a hero was concerned. He'd show them who had nerves of steel.

"About time we played a little game," Walt said loudly. "Okay? This trip is getting dull."

"Okay!" someone in the back seat echoed. "What's the game?"

"Chicken."

There were several nervous giggles.

"All right," Walt commanded. "We'll start at sixty miles an hour. When I yell One, that means my hands are off the wheel. The first one that grabs the wheel is chicken."

"Walt," Chuck said warningly.

"Shut up. Everybody else ready to play?"

They were. At least they said they were. Walt drove ahead at sixty, in the middle of the road. "One!"

For the first few seconds the car kept its course, and then, slowly, it drifted toward the right side of the road. Walt forced himself to keep his hands down, although he was beginning to regret the game. He was so scared he could hardly breathe, but he was counting on Chuck to do something.

One of the girls in the back seat screamed thinly as the car approached the edge of the road. As though that was a signal, Chuck reached over and touched the wheel, turning the car away from the ditch toward which it was headed.

Walt grabbed the wheel, rocking the car as he headed down the road. "Chicken!" he screamed, more in relief than triumph. "Chicken!"

The others took up the cry. "Chicken! Chicken!" They hooted Chuck unmercifully.

"We'll try again," Walt shouted.

"Not with me in the car," Chuck said firmly. "I've had enough of this stupidity."

"Want to get out and walk, huh?"

"I'd rather walk than ride with a moron at the wheel."

Walt jammed on his brakes, almost getting hit by the car behind him. "All right," he snarled. "Get out and walk. Get out. . . . 'Chicken' Liddell."

Chuck realized that he had earned a new nick-name, but he didn't care. He got out and without looking back, he took off at a fast walk toward Avondale. He'd rather walk all night than ride with that crazy Walt.

"Chicken Liddell. . . . Chicken Liddell. . . ." A dozen voices took up the mocking chant, but Chuck didn't turn back. He couldn't understand what had come over his friends. Once they got in cars, on the highway, it was as though they had gone mad. They were a bunch of shrieking idiots who seemed eager to be killed.

"Let's make it good, you people!" Chuck heard Walt shout. "See how close you can stick to me. Let's go!"

The motors roared into new life, and the cars took off, the drivers trying to stay bumper to bumper. As the cars passed Chuck one of them slowed for a moment, and was bumped by the one behind it. Chuck heard shrill screams of joyous fright as the people in the cars were thrown about. Then they were all gone, racing toward Avondale, and only the mocking echoes of their shouts drifted back. "Chicken Liddell. Ch . . . i . . . ck . . . en Li . . . dd . . . ell. . . ."

The cars were gone, Bud had closed the service station, and the town was dark and dead. Jimmy and Kenny, hungering for a part in the excitement, moved toward the only light on the street, like two lost moths.

The light that attracted the two boys came from the doorway of Pop Huggins' combination poolroom and tavern. The boys looked in. A couple of men were playing pool, and half a dozen more were at the bar.

"I wish there was something we could do," Jimmy said restlessly.

"If we only had a car," Kenny added. "We could follow the big kids."

The two boys sat on the front steps of Pop's place, not wanting to admit defeat and go home. In front of them, parked along the curb, was a shiny new Buick.

"Look at that car," Jimmy said. "Boy, if we had that. . . ."

"Could you drive it?"

"Sure. It's like ours, only newer."

"Whose car is it?" Kenny asked.

"That guy with the gray coat at the bar. He's been in there all night."

Kenny got up and walked to the Buick, looking inside. "He left the keys inside," Kenny said. "Somebody might steal his car."

"Who'd steal anything in this town?" Jimmy demanded. He stood beside Kenny and looked at the keys. "I'd sure like to drive a car like that."

"Me, too."

Jimmy looked around. "I'll bet we could drive it around the block and he'd never miss it."

"Nix," Kenny said. "If we ever got caught stealing a car. . . ."

"We wouldn't be stealing it, dopey," Jimmy said. "Just borrowing it for a ride around the block. If he catches us I'll say I thought it was our car, and took it by mistake."

"I don't know, Jimmy. . . ."

"We could out-run him," Jimmy said. "He's been in there so long he'd be too drunk to catch us."

"Just around the block?"

"Sure. Once. What say?"

Kenny grinned. "Okay. Let's see what the guy is doing."

They looked inside and saw the owner of the car sprawled across the bar with his hand clutching a glass.



"He'll be in there until Pop closes," Jimmy giggled. "Come on."

The two boys got into the new Buick and closed the doors gently. The inside of the car had the exciting smell of leather and metal.

"Boy," Jimmy whispered as he slid behind the wheel. "What a wagon!"

Jimmy fumbled for the starter in the dark. "There. She's running. Quiet, huh? They'll never hear us."

With Kenny watching the door of Pop's, Jimmy released the hand brake and stepped on the gas. Nothing happened. "Funny shift," Jimmy muttered. "There. Here we go." He tried again, and the car went forward in a series of jolts.

"I thought you could drive!" Kenny cried. "What's the matter?"

"Shut up. I'll have it in a minute." Jimmy pulled himself up a little so he could see over the top of the wheel. "See? It's smooth now. Takes a minute to get used to a different car."

They crawled down the street. "Your lights ain't on," Kenny said.

"You find them, I'm busy steering."

Kenny turned on the radio, heater, windshield wipers and cigarette lighter before he found the light switch. Strong beams of white light shot out before them.

Kenny adjusted the radio as they made a wide turn. "This is the life, eh?" Jimmy said as radio music filled the car. "Boy, what a wagon!"

"Look at the speedometer," Kenny said. "Do you think it could go as fast as the highest number?"

"Want to try?" Jimmy asked recklessly, the feel of the wheel filling him with a sense of daring and power.

"Nix."

"How about a little longer ride?" Jimmy suggested.

"From here to the intersection and back. It would only take a couple of minutes."

"Think it's safer?"

"Sure it's safe," Jimmy said. "We'll leave the car as soon as we get back. Anyway, nobody could catch this wagon if we were seen."

Kenny couldn't resist the smooth ride and the powerful purr of the engine. "The big kids ought to see us now," he chuckled. "Boy, would they be surprised if we passed them in this!"

"Maybe we'll see them," Jimmy said. "If we do, we'll sure show them."

Jimmy wheeled the big car around another turn, wrestled it, with some difficulty, around the S-turn under the tracks, and headed south, toward the intersection. As soon as he was on the flat he pushed down on the gas pedal, and the big Buick shot ahead.

"I have to watch the road," Jimmy said. "You see how fast we're going."

"Fifty," Kenny said.

"Seems like we're creeping. I'll go faster."

Jimmy went to sixty, but that still seemed slow in the big car. He nosed into Ninety-Mile-Curve, increasing his speed. That's the way Bud Crayne would do it. Power. That's what Bud had said to remember. Power got you out.

Power took them around the turn with the smoothness of flight, and Jimmy tried for more speed as they went into the next straight stretch. He imagined himself racing, and gave the car more power.

"Seventy," Kenny said, his eyes on the speedometer. "Seventy-five . . . eighty . . . eighty-five . . . nine . . . ty . . . That's fast enough, Jimmy."

"Gonna chicken out?" Jimmy demanded in a high voice. "Let's try for a hundred."

Jimmy tried for more speed, but the big car seemed to take over from him, and he felt helpless, as though he had lost control. He lifted his foot from the accelerator, hanging on to the wheel in an effort to keep on the road. Tires screeched as the big car rocked from side to side.

"Jimmy!" Kenny screamed. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing." Jimmy gulped as their speed diminished and he regained control once more. He drove at fifty. He'd had enough high speed for the moment.

"Here's where we turn," Jimmy said as they approached the intersection. He paid no attention to the stop sign but went through it, on the highway, and made a turn that brought him heading back toward Avondale. As he did, the lights of another car came on, and the other car started in pursuit, a siren blowing.

Jimmy and Kenny looked at each other, their faces white. "The . . . p-p-patrol," Jimmy gasped. "They're after us."

Kenny's face puckered in a preliminary to tears. "We'll be arrested and thrown in jail," he moaned. "I knew we shouldn't have done it."

"It's worse for me, I'm driving," Jimmy wailed. "We got to get away."

Hurry. Jimmy tromped on the gas and was off as fast as he could go. Behind him, the patrol car wailed in close pursuit, but it lost ground.

"We're gaining," Jimmy gasped. "Bud was right. Do what he'd do and we'll be all right. All I have to do is make believe I'm Bud Crayne, and we'll get away. We'll make it, Kenny."

"We'd better," Kenny said dolefully. "I wish the real Bud Crayne was driving."

"I'll do it Bud's way," Jimmy said. "I'll just make believe I'm Bud."

Jimmy went into the long banked curve toward home

at a speed close to eighty. When he came out of it, the patrol car had gained on him. Jimmy went faster, until he was gaining.

"D-don't forget the S-curve under the tracks," Kenny said nervously. "You have to take it slow."

"Bud Crayne style is the way we'll hook that turn," Jimmy answered. "We'll do to this cop what Bud did to those Holcomb cops. I know how. I've heard Bud tell about it enough times so I can do it, too."

"I hope so," Kenny whispered.

Behind them the siren was wailing with an ear-piercing shriek. Ted O'Day, who was driving, did everything he could think of to stop the Buick. He had his siren on, he blasted his horn, and he tried to get past the car so he could block it. Didn't that driver know about the S-turn? It was a local car, but it wasn't slowing!

Ted risked everything in an effort to pass, but the Buick cut in front of him, blocking his way. "Stop!" Ted bellowed hoarsely, knowing they would never hear. "Stop!"

If the Buick didn't slow down, Ted had to. Sick at heart he slowed, hating what he was going to see. He'd been out prowling the roads, knowing there would be a bunch of young drivers whooping it up after the game. He hadn't had to stop anyone until this Buick had run the highway sign without stopping. And it wasn't stopping now. He would have given anything at this moment not to have begun the chase.

Inside the Buick, Jimmy was laughing. "Did you see how I blocked him? I didn't let him pass. Boy, when we tell Bud about this. . . ."

"The turn, Jimmy. The turn . . . !"

"Just like Bud did it!" Jimmy shouted back, victory already sweet in his mouth. "Like he made that square turn!"

Kenny remembered one difference between this run and Bud's that Jimmy had forgotten. "That was on dirt! Jimmy. . . ."

Kenny's wild cry of despair was lost in the screech of tires on concrete as Jimmy hit his brakes with full force. The big car slewed around, tires burning, and as Jimmy tried desperately to find the gas pedal for the power he hoped would save them, the Buick leaped forward completely out of control, and smashed into the stone wall that supported the tracks above.

The impact was so great that the crushed car was thrown back into the road where it spun sideways and rolled, coming to a stop upside down. The echoes of the crash hadn't died before thin trickles of fluid dribbled out to run crookedly among bits of broken metal and splintered glass. The colorless fluid of gasoline, the thick black streams of oil, and the dark red rivulets of blood.

Ted O'Day radioed for an ambulance and a wrecker and was out of his car on the run. He dropped to his knees beside the over-turned car and turned on his flashlight. At first he couldn't believe what he saw, and looked for the driver. Then he realized whom he had chased into the wall.

The red-headed highway patrolman was sick and shocked as he lifted out the two broken little bodies. *If he'd only known!* He put the two bodies at the side of the road and wept as he covered them with blankets. "Boys . . . boys . . . Oh . . . boys. . . ."

He stood up and walked to the center of the road, waving his flashlight to slow traffic that was coming. Half a dozen cars, close together, horns blaring as they weaved back and forth across the road in a gay rat-race.

As the caravan drew close enough to see the patrolman, Walt, who drove the lead car, grunted con-

temptuously. "He's got no right to stop us," Walt declared. "And I'll tell him so."

"There's something behind him," LaVerne said. She had moved into the front seat. "I can't see. . . . Something like a wreck."

"I see glass on the highway," someone else said. "Oh boy, a wreck. Let's get out and see."

The line of cars stopped and the word went back. A wreck ahead. For a moment it seemed part of the game. The crowd of high school boys and girls went forward on foot, giggling nervously.

It was the look on Ted O'Day's face that first quieted them, and then the sight of the wrecked car, with the dark pools of liquid around it.

"Who was it?" a girl asked in a frightened voice.

Ted O'Day pointed toward the two bodies under the blankets. It was difficult for him to speak. "Jimmy and Kenny."

The girl screamed hysterically and couldn't be quieted. It was Kenny's sister. Her screams made the tragedy become a part of every life. Frightened, stunned, and sick of cars, sick with the thoughts of rat-races and games of chicken, the crowd of teen-agers stood together, faces white and hearts afraid. For the first time, it seemed, they understood where their antics could lead. The smell of death was in their nostrils, and they were like horses who have scented a mountain lion. Jaws clenched, eyes staring, they understood that it could happen to them. *It could happen to them!*

They thought they would never forget this moment of horror, and that its terrible lesson would remain with them forever. But in time they all forgot. Some in weeks, some in days, and some, after a couple of hours of talk, drove fast on the way home that night.

## Chapter 7

BUD was in the garage grinding valves for My-Son-Ralph's Chevy. The county Rodeo was only a month away, and everyone who was eligible had entered. As a result, there had been a rush of work at Jake's, since part of the contest had to do with the mechanical shape of the driver's car.

It was night, and Bud was alone, working under the harsh glare of an unshaded bulb. He wore his coveralls, his boots, and his old hat with the brim pinned up. He whistled through his teeth as he worked, not trying for any tune, but just for a little noise to keep him company.

A dozen times Bud lifted his head as he thought he heard someone on the gravel outside. And although he knew they were dead and buried, he kept feeling that some time he would look up and see Jimmy and Kenny riding up on their bikes, digging gravel.

He missed those two kids. It didn't seem right not to have them hanging at his elbow, watching, asking questions, and listening to his stories. Poor fool kids, Bud thought. What had they been trying to do?

He knew. Deep in his heart he knew. He had read the skid marks and had understood. They had tried to take his advice. Jimmy had tried to drive like Bud Crayne. He could see that burned into the road.

Bud heard footsteps on the gravel and looked up quickly, the old hope in his heart. Maybe they *would* be out there. Maybe it was all a mistake, a bad dream.

My-Son-Ralph came in, tall, good-looking, casual. He looked over Bud's shoulder. "How does it look?"

"You can drive it home tonight if you wait around long enough," Bud said.

"Working late?"

"Have to. When I'm through with you I've got Walt's Hudson to go over, and a couple of country kids are going to leave their cars here over the week-end for major work."

Ralph chuckled. "Looks as though everybody wants a shot at winning the Roadeo. Ever since it was announced, you never saw such careful drivers in your life."

"I know. Even Walt Thomas drives up like an old lady. No more big fat skids to the pump."

"It's a good thing my father took care of all the tickets I was given this year," Ralph said comfortably. "With his cooperation I have a clean record, so I'll be in it, too."

"Think you'll win?" Bud asked, picking up another valve.

"No. You'll win. I'm shooting for second." Ralph said, grinning, "Aren't you worried about the competition you'll get from Chicken Liddell?"

Bud laughed out loud. "I like Mr. Cole," Bud said, "and I sure hate to show him up. But when he said he could teach Chicken Liddell to drive well enough to win the Roadeo, that was too much."

"I see them on the road all the time," Ralph said.

"I do, too. They turn around at the station a lot. You ought to see Chicken come creeping down the street and making the turn. You'd think he was in the middle of Chicago. It's funny to watch."

"It isn't very fair for you, though," Ralph said. "Not letting you drive until the Roadeo."

"It doesn't bother me," Bud said, shrugging his shoulders "Can I use your car when it's time? My rod won't qualify."

"Sure, sure," Ralph said. He looked at Bud's car. "Decided about trading yet?"



"No. I'll let you know when I make up my mind. I don't want you getting killed."

"I've got reasons for wanting to live, too," Ralph said. "A guy was around from the State University. They've been watching my basketball record, and they'd like to have me enroll. Made a pretty good offer, too."

"Taking it?"

"I'll wait. There'll be other offers. I'll take the best. You know, I could play basketball in college, then turn pro for a couple of years. I could earn enough that way to do what I wanted to."

"What's that?"

"I don't know. Go on into law like my father, I suppose. He'd put me through, but I'd rather do it on my own."

"You're not long for Avondale, I can see that," Bud said. "I wish I. . . . Well, maybe I will, if I'm lucky in the Rodeo."

"Chicken Liddell got the same offer," Ralph said. "We talked it over, and decided we'd go to the same place, so we could be on the same team again. We work well together."

"That's swell," Bud said. "Swell." He bent to his work. Ralph and Chuck had a dozen ways out. They were already thinking of the future. They'd go on together. And himself? He'd be the local mechanic if he didn't win that Rodeo. He had to win. It was his only way.

Bud thought about going to Mr. Cole for pointers, just to make sure, but he couldn't do it. He couldn't admit he was wrong. Not when he felt so strongly that he was right. No, he'd just have to win it on his own. Just like Ralph and Chuck had won their chances for college by playing the game they knew.

They heard footsteps on the gravel outside, and a moment later LaVerne came in with Marge Anderson in tow.

"Hello, Bud. Hello, Ralph. I didn't know you'd be here." LaVerne favored Ralph with a smile.

"Hi." Bud acknowledged LaVerne's greeting. He paid no attention to Marge. No one did. She was just a shadow.

There was a long silence as Bud worked. Things hadn't been going too well between Bud and LaVerne since he'd been grounded. She still came around to see him at the garage, but they'd made a sad discovery. When Bud lost his right to drive, he and LaVerne didn't seem to have anything to talk about, nor were they able to find any activity that took the place of riding around.

At first they'd tried walking out together, but the walks had been dull, and they'd stopped. Now LaVerne came around to the garage to visit, and they tried to keep up the pretense of being interested in each other. But they weren't. LaVerne was bored with sitting around the garage, and Bud didn't find her company interesting. She just sat and looked at his car and sighed, and he was glad when she left. Neither of them knew how to break off their supposed close relationship.

"How are things?" Bud asked at length.

LaVerne perked up a little. "All right. You know, Miss Dawson sent my picture to several talent scouts. She thinks I have a real chance for a stage or screen career. After the school play I . . ."

"You'll think you've got a new motor now," Bud interrupted, turning to Ralph. He hadn't been listening to LaVerne's chatter.

"Oh . . . yeah . . . yeah . . ." Ralph had been listening to LaVerne, finding her talk—and her—interesting.

"Now you'll find your oil consumption going up a little with a tight mill," Bud went on. "But that's a good sign. If I had your car I'd think about trying to get a super charger for it. Blower equipment would be cheaper than going in for special heads and manifolds and all

that junk, and the results would be just as good. Maybe better. Only trouble, they don't make any blower stuff that's good for a stock motor. Maybe I could work out something myself, if you'd be interested. . . ."

"Huh?" Ralph was still looking at LaVerne, and she was looking at him, and he hadn't followed Bud's talk. "Yeah, Bud. Okay. Anything you say."

Bud shook his head in despair. Trying to talk motors was useless. Nobody cared, or was interested. Only Mr. Cole was worth talking to.

Marge Anderson peeked over Bud's shoulder at Ralph's motor. He was annoyed, but didn't say anything. "I wonder," Marge said, "if you couldn't get better performance with a couple of ram tubes extended forward from dual sidedraft carbs. I read. . . ."

Bud stepped back a pace, a slow, incredulous grin widening his lips: "What did you say?"

"Ram tubes," Marge said. "You could relieve the carbs of their fuel-bowl functions and inject the fuel through a metering system. Duke Hallock did it with pretty good results on the West Coast."

Bud stared. Marge Anderson talking like this? Marge the shadow, the moon-faced, buck-toothed, lumpy character with thin straight hair who never had any ideas LaVerne hadn't given her, like cast-off clothing. . . .

Bud forgot Ralph and LaVerne. "Where'd you learn all that?" Bud demanded. "What do you know about hop-ups?"

"I can read, can't I?" Marge said spiritedly. "Can't girls be interested in engineering as well as boys?"

Bud grinned wider and shook his head. "Yeah, I suppose so. But I never figured. . . ."

Bud pulled her closer, and they both bent over the Chevy motor. "Look," Bud said happily, "Before you go talking about ram tubes, let's start at the bottom.

You can't just hang tubes on a stock mill and expect wonders. The first thing I'd do would be install a . . ."

"Hey, Bud," Ralph said. "LaVerne and I are going for a coke. Want one?"

"No," Bud answered. "Go ahead."

"Marge?" LaVerne's voice both questioned and commanded.

"I'll stay and watch."

LaVerne didn't mind. She was glad to have a chance to be alone with Ralph. Ralph was interested in her acting, and her career. It meant something to him that she really had a chance at being on the stage. Ralph could understand things like that. All Bud knew was motors.

"Miss Dawson sent a letter," Bud heard LaVerne tell Ralph as they walked away. "The talent scout said he would be down to see the school play, and if I was everything Miss Dawson said, he might be able to offer me a contract. It would mean I'd leave Avondale, of course. . . ."

There went LaVerne, Bud thought. She'd be gone, too. She'd make a bid for her career and leave him far behind. They were all getting away. They were all making a break and going on. He was the only one who was stuck. He, and maybe Walt Thomas, and Marge. They'd keep the small town going when the others were far away and far above it.

"After new cams," Bud said to Marge, shaking off his desolate feelings, "the next step would be to spend a little money reboring the block and putting in aluminum pistons. But then, you'd need tubular push rods. . . . And that's only the beginning. Once you start, Marge, you're on your way. You can't quit in the middle and have anything. Now, I did make a change on the flywheel of this job. Take a look."

Marge bent over the motor. Bud frowned. "Where you looking?" he demanded. "Don't you know the fly-wheel from the fan?"

Marge stepped back, frightened and confused. She shook her head violently. "No . . . No . . ."

Bud pushed his hat back in disgust. "Well, of all the . . . What was the big idea?"

"I don't know," Marge said, covering her face with her hands. She began to cry. "I thought if I made believe I knew something about motors, you'd talk to me. Nobody ever talks to me."

"Well," Bud said to himself, completely floored, "imagine that!"

"I read up on motors," Marge said. "But I forgot." Her voice trailed off in a thin wail.

Bud didn't know what to do. He rubbed his nose, and half laughed, but he felt sorry for her. For the first time, he understood her a little. He was getting the idea of what it was like to be left out of things.

"Shucks," he said. "If you really are interested in motors, I'll talk to you."

"I really am," Marge sniffled. "Even if I don't know anything about them. I'm interested."

"Well, shucks," Bud said again, with an embarrassed laugh, "we all have to learn. I'll tell you anything you want to know."

"I wouldn't be in your way," Marge promised eagerly. "I'd stay out of your way and listen and try to learn and do what I could to help. Honest, Bud."

Bud looked at her face. It had come alive. She looked like a person. There was interest and eagerness in her face, as though some kind of switch had been pushed that turned on her inner lights.

"Here," Bud said. "Put on these old coveralls of Jake's

and you can help me put the rest of this Chevvy back together. I'll tell you what to do."

Marge slipped into the coveralls that were much too large for her. She had to roll up the sleeves so her hands could stick out. She tied her scarf over her head to protect her hair, and was ready to work.

"Okay," Bud said, pleased to have an interested assistant, "take that little hammer over there, and tap right over here. Now, I'll tell you what you're doing. . . . Tap a little harder. . . . There. Now, these little things are called valves, and they go in like this. See? Now I'll tell you how they work, and what I've been doing. . . ."

Their heads close together, Bud and Marge put Ralph's motor together, and at every step Bud explained what was going on, and what each part was for. Marge followed him eagerly, and she understood. Bud made it seem so simple and logical that she understood.

They didn't realize how much time had passed before Ralph and LaVerne returned, walking slowly, close together.

"Well," LaVerne said in surprise. "Look at Marge. What do you think you're doing?"

"Helping me," Bud said. "And a good assistant, too. Your heap is ready to roll, Ralph. Take a test run."

"I wish you could go along," Ralph said.

"Yeah." Bud shook his head. "But, I can't. So you do it."

Ralph moved toward the car. "Mind if LaVerne goes with me?" he asked casually.

"I don't care," Bud said. He wiped his hands carefully.

"I don't think. . . ." LaVerne said half-heartedly.

"Go ahead," Bud insisted. "Ride around a little. I can't take you, but that's no reason you can't go."

LaVerne got in the car and Marge, from force of habit, started to slip out of her coveralls to go along.

"You can stay and help Bud if you want to," LaVerne said to Marge. Her eyes said, "Stay here!"

"Okay," Marge grinned. She wiped her face with the back of her hand and left a dark smudge. "If you don't mind."

"I don't mind," LaVerne said sweetly.

Bud and Marge stood side by side as Ralph drove away with LaVerne. As Ralph turned around on the gravel and gunned his car out toward the road, Bud watched him go with a funny feeling in his heart.

So this is the way it happened, he thought as he saw Ralph's lights pull away. He knew, in that moment that it had happened. Easily, quickly, without quarreling or excuses, LaVerne was gone. She had walked in the garage earlier as his girl. Now, driving away, she was Ralph's. That's the way it was. Quickly, painlessly, but a fact.

Bud stared after Ralph's car for several moments. Marge stood beside him, afraid to say anything. Bud looked at her. Marge knew, too. Well, he was glad it was over. Really, he was glad it was over. He smiled at Marge and she was quick to smile back.

"Want to work some more?" Bud asked. He hadn't meant his voice to sound his loneliness, but it was there, and Marge heard it. She knew that sound too well to let it pass unheeded.

"Sure," she said cheerfully. "If you want me to help. I'm not much good. . . ."

"Aaaah, you're terrific," Bud said. "Come on. I'll show you how to fix the short in Walt's dimmer switch, and I'll explain the ignition to you."

And about the time Marge was learning about coils and points, Ralph was asking LaVerne, "Where would you like to go? We could drive to Greenfield and get something to eat."

And LaVerne, leaning back in the seat so her head

touched Ralph's shoulder, closed her eyes. It was night, and she was riding, going somewhere, doing something, being someone. She was riding, floating through space, and her dreams were just beyond her, about to come true. "Anything you say, Ralph," LaVerne murmured. "Anything you say."



## Chapter 8

BUD CRAYNE stood in front of the service station and laughed. It was funny, that's all there was to it. Driving toward him was Chuck Liddell—Chicken Liddell—and seated beside him was Mr. Cole, instructing. Chuck drove slowly through Avondale, put out his left hand, and made a left turn that brought him around to the gas pumps. He stopped.

"Nice going," Bud said. "You missed the pumps." Bud cleaned off the windshield. "What will you have?"

"Five regular," Chuck said. He grinned. "Ready for tomorrow?"

"Always was," Bud said. He went around to the back of the car and pumped in five gallons of regular.

"Tomorrow's the big day," Mr. Cole said as Bud handed him his change. "Nervous?"

"Why should I be?"

"You wouldn't admit it if you were," Mr. Cole said.

"I'll win," Bud said. "I know every kid in the contest. I'll win."

"And if you lose?"

"I won't lose," Bud said stubbornly. "Unless Chuck here beats me out. Eh, Chuck?"

"It won't be easy," Chuck admitted. "But I'll try."

"Good boy," Bud said, laughing.

"He'll win," Mr. Cole said. "You know, Chuck is the only driver in the Rodeo who has been taught to drive by approved driver training methods. I'm counting on his victory to get driver training before the school board again."

"I hope you're not risking any money on that," Bud said. "All the local money is riding on me."

"I don't gamble with money," Mr. Cole said. He looked at Bud steadily. "The stake in this is more valuable than money. It's human lives, Bud. You are, if I may say so, Death's driver."

"I never killed anybody," Bud protested. "I've never had an accident. Why call me that?"

"You know why, Bud. You know as well as I do that the county Roadeo is a contest between your way and ours. Between disciplined, thoughtful driving, and catch-as-catch-can driving. I've taught others to drive in other towns, Bud. None of *my* pupils ever rammed into a wall trying to escape the police."

Before Bud could think of an answer, Mr. Cole motioned for Chuck to drive on. Bud stared after them angrily. Just wait until tomorrow. He'd show them who could handle a car. Just wait. His glance went to the S-turn, and he looked away. How could anyone say it was his fault Jimmy and Kenny had been killed? How?

There was a worried frown on Chuck Liddell's face as he drove away from Bud. "Mr. Cole," Chuck said, "do you really think I can win tomorrow?"

"Positive."

"I don't know," Chuck shook his head. "I've felt confident right up until today. But I've ridden with Bud. He can do things with a car that nobody else around here can do. I'm afraid he'll run me right out of the Roadeo."

"That's what he's counting on," Mr. Cole said. "He's counting on his reputation to scare the others into making mistakes. You're right about him to some extent, Chuck. He can handle a car better than you can right now, and better than anyone else who'll be competing. But he won't win."

"I don't understand," Chuck said forlornly.

"He can handle a car," Mr. Cole went on, "but he

can't handle himself. The Roadeo is a contest with rules, Chuck. Strict rules. And Bud will lose because he doesn't care about rules. He thinks rules are for others, and he's above them. He won't get any further than you would get in basketball if you went into the game with that attitude. No matter how good you were, Chuck, you'd foul out if you ignored the rules. And that's where Bud will lose. And that's where you will win. Believe me. Meanwhile, let's practice going in reverse gear using only the rear-vision mirror. That's your weakest point."

"Okay," Chuck sighed. "But I'll be shaky."

Mr. Cole laughed. "Don't worry. You'll do the right thing at the right time because you've never learned to do the wrong things. In the months I've been teaching you, proper driving habits have become second nature with you. That's why I know you'll win, no matter how scared you may feel."

\* \* \* \*

The county Roadeo was being held at the Fair Grounds in Greenfield, the county seat. Forbidden to touch the wheel until the Roadeo itself, Bud rode over with Ralph. He wasn't worried about handling Ralph's car. He had driven it many times in the past, and as soon as he was behind the wheel, he would be ready for anything. Even, he thought, a square turn.

Ralph parked his car in a special section where, with other competing cars, it would be examined by experts for its condition, and to be certain it had only stock equipment.

"That's one thing we don't have to worry about," Bud said as they walked away. "I really gave your heap a good going-over. You won't lose any points on your car."

"Neither will you," Ralph said.

"Bunch of people entered," Bud commented. He looked over the field with a critical eye.

Bud drew many curious glances as he walked around with Ralph. As a gesture of defiance, he had refused to wear good clothes. He wore his black leather jacket, his boots with the brass chains, and his hat with the front brim pinned to the front of the crown. He knew he was recognized, and others were talking about him, and it made him proud. He swaggered a little, and tried to look contemptuous. Yes, he was Bud Crayne. They'd see what that meant when he got behind the wheel.

Mr. Cole and Ted O'Day were helping run the Roadeo. They saw Bud and Ralph together. "There's our speed demon," O'Day chuckled. "You have to give him credit for spunk. He hasn't broken his word about getting in a car, and he's here all primed to win."

"Yes," Mr. Cole said. "He's worth saving. He saves hard, but maybe that's what makes it worthwhile. Pretty good turn-out, don't you think?"

"I'd like to see more," O'Day said. "I can think of fifty who couldn't be in it because they had violations against them this year. Maybe this will teach them to keep their noses clean for the next year, so they can enter the next Roadeo."

"It's already done a great deal of good," Mr. Cole said. "We've had a town full of careful drivers ever since the Roadeo was announced."

"I'm worrying about after it's over," O'Day said. "What will keep the losers from blowing off steam on the road?"

"Hope," Guy Cole answered. "Hope that if they keep out of trouble they'll come back and win next year."

The big red-headed patrolman grinned. "I'll start hoping you're right—as of right now."

Bud and Ralph continued their tour of the Roadeo

area with Bud pleasantly conscious of the looks that kept coming his way. He knew the others were talking about him, recalling his drive to Trenton, and, in talking, convincing themselves that they could never win over him. Everyone expected to receive a driving lesson from Bud, and he was prepared to give it.

A voice coming over a loud-speaker called them to attention and directed them to take their places in the pavilion used for judging stock during the county fair. The young drivers made for the pavilion with much talk and nervous laughter. They filed in, found seats, and waited for instructions.

The opening speech of welcome and instruction was given by a gray-haired official of the state safety commission.

"I congratulate you all for being here," the official began. "The fact that you have all gone through the past twelve months without a traffic violation, and are eligible for this competition is a good sign. This is the first Roadeo. Next year, and in the years that follow, I hope the Roadeos will be bigger and better, so that we may have town and city competitions to determine county representatives, and county winners to go into the state-wide Roadeo. But we have made a good beginning, and I am proud of you all."

There was a round of applause. Bud didn't join in.

"Before we begin the actual tests," the official continued, "I want to say a few words about why we are having the Roadeo. You all read the newspapers, and you know that drivers of your age group are involved in too many accidents in proportion to the number of drivers. Various 'cures' have been proposed to curb wild and so-called 'hot-rod' driving. Some of your severest critics would take the driving privilege away from all

of you until you are twenty-one. So do the actions of a few threaten the privileges of you all."

The speaker paused. Bud glowered. He felt the words were being directed at him. He was aware that others were looking at him. His lips tightened. He'd show them. When the action started he'd have an answer.

"We believe you are good drivers," the official continued in a strong voice, winning a heavy round of applause. "We believe you are the best drivers—potentially—in our state. You are young. Your reactions are quick, and many of you understand, far better than your elders, the workings of the automobile. Why, then, if you are young, and quick, and understand your vehicle are you involved in so many accidents? The answer, which you will prove to yourselves today in actual tests, is that you lack judgment, and your attitude toward driving is faulty."

The murmur that followed this statement was not a happy one, but the official smiled.

"Some of you may wonder why we've gone to the trouble and expense of having a Rodeo," the speaker said. "Why many of us are giving our time and effort, and why many individuals and organizations have donated money for prizes. What is it to us how you drive?"

"The answer is a simple one. We want you to live, and we don't want you to kill us with your driving. You young drivers aren't the *only* sinners in this respect. Adults do their share of bad driving. But we can't do much for the adults, and we do feel we can help you.

"The way each and every one of you scores in this Rodeo will give you an individual measure of your driving. Some of you will be better drivers than you think you are, and some (there was a wave of laughter) not quite as good as you think you are.

"Whatever your individual results, think them over,

and, if you aren't a winner this year, plan to be better, and win a prize next year. If you do that you'll almost be certain of winning a tremendous prize—a year of safe driving that will keep you off the dead and injured statistic sheets."

Bud leaned toward Ralph. "How much longer does this go on?" he muttered. "I didn't think we'd get a sermon."

"There are many reasons why young people drive recklessly and carelessly," the speaker was saying. "They want to show off with their cars; they are bored; there isn't anything else they can do; and they crave action, which craving is satisfied by speed. These are all good reasons in the sense that they *are* the reasons, the real reasons for bad driving among young drivers. But I ask you—which one or more of these reasons is worth dying for? Worth losing an arm or leg for? And it can happen to you. Remember, it can happen to you. If I am mistaken, if there is any person here with a charmed life, I wish that person would stand."

The official looked around at his audience, smiling. "I see we are all mortal men and women," he said. "As I expected. One final word. We don't expect these Roadeos to banish bad driving from the highways. As I said, there are many reasons why young people drive badly, and forget that the automobile is merely a means of transportation and not a weapon or a kind of mechanized love potion. This Rodeo won't solve all the problems, but we hope it will solve a few. If it helps save one life this year it has been worthwhile. If the competition and the possibility of a prize cause any of you to be more careful on the road—well, we've done some good."

"Now, I won't delay you any longer. You have all been given numbers, and we'll get under way. The even

numbers will go out to the contest grounds to begin their driving tests, the odd numbers will stay where they are and begin with the written test."

Bud glanced down at his number. Thirty-seven. He frowned, and for the first time felt a loss of confidence. "What do they mean, written test?" he demanded of Ralph. "What's that got to do with it?"

"Search me," Ralph answered, getting to his feet. "Well, I'm an even number. See you after the fireworks."

Bud didn't answer. He stared with hostile eyes at the men who were walking along the rows of contestants handing out pencils and sheets of paper. He took his sullenly.

"Everyone have his questions?" the official in the center of the stock ring asked. "All right. When I give the signal, unfold your papers and fill in the answers. There are ten questions, and you have ten minutes to answer. They're all True or False questions, so you won't have any writing to do. Just thinking. Ready? Go!"

Bud unfolded his paper and saw the list of ten questions, each with two blank squares for a true or false answer. He took a minute to read through all the questions before trying to answer the first. That would give him an idea of the questions he could answer at once, and the ones that would take a little thought. Skimming through the ten questions in a hurry, Bud smiled and relaxed. He wet the tip of the pencil and marked the first. Then he moved on to the second. These were his questions:

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1. If you have average reaction speed and are driving at 40 miles an hour, your car will travel a maximum of 15 feet before you can begin to apply your brakes in an emergency.

True [ ]

False [ ]

\*\*\* The correct answers are given at the back of the book. Before you look, test yourself.



2. If a car going 20 m.p.h. can be brought to a dead stop 19 feet from the spot where the brakes were first applied, then a car moving at 40 m.p.h. can be braked to a stop in 38 feet.  
True [ ]                      False [ ]
3. Your speed has no effect on the distance at which you can recognize danger ahead at night.  
True [ ]                      False [ ]
4. At night, you can see an unexpected object in the road ahead just as far as you can see an expected object.  
True [ ]                      False [ ]
5. Glare from the driving beam of the average approaching headlight reduces the distance at which you can recognize danger by about 40 per cent.  
True [ ]                      False [ ]
6. If you speed up to 40 m.p.h., you can safely pass a car traveling at 30 m.p.h. in 450 feet.  
True [ ]                      False [ ]
7. Use of *full* chains on rear wheels in wintertime will enable you to start and stop more quickly on ice.  
True [ ]                      False [ ]
8. If through an error, you find yourself driving too fast in a curve, you should take your foot off the accelerator and put the brake on gently. (Guess what Bud marked this one.)  
True [ ]                      False [ ]
9. Recovery from a skid will be made easier if you leave the clutch alone and turn your front wheels in the direction of the skid.  
True [ ]                      False [ ]
10. If you are driving at about 40 m.p.h. on a dry road, the best way to make an emergency stop is to push the brake pedal down hard enough to lock your wheels and hold it there.  
True [ ]                      False [ ]

Bud Crayne was through with the questions in less than five minutes. He looked around scornfully at the other contestants. They were chewing their pencils, looking

at the ceiling as though expecting to see the answers written there, staring at the floor, rubbing their foreheads, sweating, groaning, and guessing like mad.

So this was where Mr. Cole had expected him to fall down. This was the part they had counted on to beat him. What a surprise they had in store for themselves when they saw his paper. He hadn't missed a question. It was simple stuff. You couldn't call yourself a driver unless you knew that.

Bud leaned back and looked triumphantly across the arena. On the other side he saw Chuck Liddell—Chicken Liddell. Chuck was also sitting back taking it easy. He hadn't found the questions very tough either. Bud shrugged. Well, that was to be expected. But once they were behind the wheel it wouldn't be the same.

But his section wasn't ready for the wheel. The next step was a test involving a driver's wheel, gas pedal and brake, mounted before a movie screen. The contestants went in one at a time, and when they were through, they went out the other way, so they couldn't report to friends on how to go through the test.

When it was Bud's turn he sat behind the wheel, adjusted his seat to a comfortable position, and faced the blank screen. The operator of the machine stepped aside. "A film will run for two and a half minutes," Bud was told. "It will give you the illusion of driving on the highway and on city streets. Various situations will come up on the screen. Handle them as quickly as you can."

Bud nodded. "Okay. I'm ready."

The film came on. It was as though Bud were driving along the highway about forty miles an hour, close behind another car. Bud watched the car on the screen, and also the highway.

Suddenly the tail lights flashed on the car ahead. Bud turned his wheel to the left and pushed the gas pedal

to the floor. Nothing happened. Instead of seeing himself swing around the car ahead, the camera moved up behind the other car and the image faded from the screen.

"This thing isn't working," Bud said. "I turned to pass."

"It's working all right," the operator explained quickly as a new driving situation flashed on the screen. "You were supposed to put on your brakes."

"I could have passed," Bud protested. "The road was open. I . . ."

"Watch the screen," the operator said hurriedly. "You'll miss the next one, too."

The next scene represented Bud as driving at cruising speed toward an intersection of two highways. The corners were almost hidden by big trees. Bud watched that intersection closely as the screen showed him moving up quickly. They'd probably have a car shoot out from one side just as he got there. He'd be ready for that trick, and have his brake on in no time.

Waiting tensely for the expected car to show on the screen, Bud saw the image dim and fade as the scene was over. He was puzzled.

"You missed the red light on that one," the operator said.

"What red light?"

"An overhead light, over the intersection. Didn't you see it turn red?"

"I didn't see anything," Bud complained. "I was watching the intersection for cars."

"You'll have to be more alert. Now, step on your gas pedal and start the machine again. And be alert, boy."

Bud shook his head angrily. The next scene showed him speeding down a country road. As the camera flashed by side roads and driveways, Bud was ready to hit the

brake. Ahead, around a turn, he saw a railroad crossing. It reminded him of his Trenton run. As he approached, the warning lights began winking red stop signals. Bud's foot was on the brake in a lightning move.

"Good boy," the operator said. "Much better reaction time on that than average."

Bud nodded angrily. He was certainly off to a bad start on this test. He'd missed the first two braking situations altogether. How did he know you were supposed to hit the brake? He was driving his way, only he wasn't getting an even break.

The screen showed him driving along another country road. Angry, resentful, upset because he had missed the first two sections of the test, Bud pressed the gas pedal down to the floor as though to hurtle right through the screen if that were possible.

Ahead a sharp turn to the right loomed up. Bud kept his foot down. It wasn't time to brake, and they couldn't prove it was. He eyed the turn as though it were a real one. Suddenly, without warning, a car appeared at the turn, and then another, passing the first on the blind turn.

Bud forgot it was a screen he was watching, and that the action had been deliberately filmed to test his reaction. In his anger and frustration he saw the filmed scene as a real one. His reaction was a wave of blind hatred against the driver of the car passing on the turn.

"I'll show that stupid. . . ." Bud thought. "I'll run him off the road. Pulling a trick like that . . ."

In his desire to punish the careless driver he tried to send his simulated car flying forward, and it was only when the scene faded that Bud realized, too late, he had missed again. He'd been too mad to think about it.

The operator of the machine was quiet, and Bud, getting hold of himself, resolved not to let anger or laxity

spoil any more road situations. When the next one flashed on he was ready.

The next scene was deceptively simple. It showed a bus stopped at the right hand side of the road, and the driver coming down to pass it. As Bud seemed to reach the bus, a man reading a newspaper walked out from in front of the bus into Bud's path.

He knew he was supposed to brake in order to make a good score, but again he was late. In real driving he would have blasted at the man with his horns, then pulled around him. It took Bud a moment to translate what he considered a non-braking situation into a braking situation. Once he made the translation his foot moved like lightning, but he lost time and points trying to make up his mind. It was hard to go against his established driving habits. Very hard.

It went that way through the two final scenes. In the next, that dumb woman didn't have any sense opening a car door in his path, and in the last scene some guy made a left turn right in front of him without giving a signal. In Bud's mind the jay-walker, the careless woman with the door and the reckless left turn were actions that deserved any punishment they earned. If they got hit or run over because of their foolish actions, why blame him for not braking? They'd learn to look out for themselves after a close shave or two.

Bud finished the test knowing he had lost points, and he was burned. His way of getting out of tight situations was as good as the ones they were trying to ram down his throat, but he would lose points because he didn't do it their way. Wait until he had a real car under him. He'd show them how to drive. That Trenton run was an example of real driving, not this trick stuff on the screen.

"How did you make out, Bud?" Chuck Liddell was at his side.

"Okay," Bud said shortly.

"It was tricky," Chuck said. "I really got caught a couple of times."

"I don't see why they made you brake all the time," Bud complained. "Why stop just because somebody else does something foolish?"

"It's the safe thing to do," Chuck said. "The way I see it, just because someone else is stupid, that's no reason for me to rush in stupidly on my own."

"To be fair, they should have given us a chance to get out with power, as well as with brakes," Bud insisted. "Why wear out your tires stopping for some jerk like that one who walked out from behind the bus? A guy that does a trick like that ought to be brushed with a fender, to teach him manners."

"Maybe. The way I see it, I just try to do the safe thing. What difference does it make who's right or wrong in a wreck?"

"Well," Bud said with conscious cruelty, "the way I look at it, Chicken, is that I'm driving my car and you're driving yours. And I'll drive mine the way I want to. I've got a right to the road, and so have you. I'll keep on my side, and you keep on yours. But nobody is going to run me off my side."

"I suppose it depends on what you think is more important," Chuck said. "Being in the right or being alive. I prefer to be alive."

"It takes guts to defend your rights," Bud said. "See you, Chicken." Bud turned and walked away. Chuck looked after him, troubled. Bud seemed confident. Confidence stuck out all over him. Once they were behind real wheels, it would be hard to match Bud. But he had to win. If Bud won it would make the Roadeo a farce. It would be a victory for the drag racers, the highway speed merchants, and the drivers who believed it was "chicken"

to extend another driver or a pedestrian the smallest act of courtesy.

An hour later the two sections changed tests. The even numbers came in for the written test and the driving machine, the odds went out to do their best in their cars.

Bud met My-Son-Ralph walking toward the pavilion, his head hanging.

"How'd you do, Ralph?"

"Rotten," Ralph said. "They dock you for everything. You'll see." He went on without further talk, and Bud headed for the Chevy in which he would run through the road test. For the first time in months he was going to get his hands on a real wheel.

As he waited his turn to run through the course, he looked over the opposition once more. A sudden thought struck him, and he sought out Chuck Liddell.

"Say Chuck," Bud said, as though they hadn't recently argued. "Where's Walt Thomas? He said he was going to enter."

"Didn't you know? Walt couldn't make it."

"I didn't know." Bud's eye still roved the crowd.

"His father wouldn't let him come," Chuck went on. "Walt told me about it last night. His father said that Walt could spend his nights driving his car up and down the road, but in the daytime he had to stay and work on the farm and earn his keep."

"Didn't Walt explain about the Roadeo?"

"He tried to, but it didn't do any good. Walt's father had some work lined up for him today, and Walt had to do it."

"Never work for your relations," Bud commented. "You never get a break."

Chuck's square friendly face showed his feelings. "Too bad about Walt. He was counting on making it."

Bud hooked his thumbs in his belt and traced a design

in the dirt with his booted toe. "It doesn't make too much difference. Walt wouldn't have won any prizes."

"There's more to any game than winning," Chuck said. "Just competing. . . ."

"I wouldn't know about that," Bud answered, squinting at the sun. "Anything I'm in, I'm in to win. Don't you, when the school team's in a game?"

"Sure, but . . ."

"And don't you want to win today?"

"Of course. But the real fun in any game is the playing, win or lose. That's the thing that makes school sports so much fun."

"I never had time for school teams," Bud said. "So I can't argue with you about that."

"You should have taken time," Chuck said. "Well, here we go, Bud. Best of luck to you."

"Thanks," Bud said. "Same to . . ." He caught himself just in time. What was he doing? He'd almost wished Chuck the best of luck, and after the shaky start he'd made, he'd need it all for himself.



## Chapter 9

THE ROADEO COURSE was set up so that a different car could start through the tests about every three minutes. The rules were simple. Each car was given exactly one gallon of gasoline at the start, and when the tests were over, the driver was to continue around the track until he had run out of gas. The drivers were allowed a maximum of ten points for each test, and lost points when they made mistakes. One of the tests, the very last, was to see how far they could drive before using up the gallon of gas. Each tenth of a mile they drove after finishing the other tests was worth an extra point.

In addition to the points won or lost in actual testing, each official at each test marked the competing driver on general car handling and attitude. The Roadeo as a whole was designed to get an accurate, over-all picture of each driver's ability in every phase of driving.

The car ahead of Bud was slow. As Bud breezed through the preliminary test, he found himself catching up, and being made to wait. He didn't like this, and became impatient, waiting his turn. Automatically, he found himself gunning Ralph's Chevvy while waiting. He'd have to stop that. It wasted gas, and he'd lose points on mileage. He tried to remember to let the Chevvy idle, but his foot, accustomed to action without a black and white message from his brain, kept creeping toward the accelerator and wanting to gun the motor.

The parallel parking test was ahead. The testing space was just large enough for a car to get in, and was bounded by a car in front, and a car behind. The idea was to get parked in the fewest number of turns and the shortest time. The car was supposed to be parked six inches from

the curb, with points also taken off for being too close or too far out. A maximum of three tries was allowed.

Bud waited scornfully as the driver ahead of him backed into the parking space, over-ran the curb, pulled out, came back in too shallow, and finally called it quits about a foot from the curb. The other car pulled out and went on to the next test, and Bud was given the signal to come on.

Bud moved the Chevy ahead with a smooth, confident motion, determined to show the officials how a car could be parked. Without one wasted movement he stopped even with the lead parked car and shifted into reverse. With slow, steady pressure on the gas, and a delicate foot on the clutch, Bud moved back, turned in, spun his wheel and came to rest, all in one smooth motion, without touching either the car in front or in back. The judges marked his time and measured the distance from his tires to the curb. Six inches. Bud could hardly restrain a grin of triumph. Let anyone else in the contest beat that! He was at one with his car, a centaur, twentieth century style.

Bud was given the signal to unpark and go on to the next test. He looked to his left to see that the way was clear, then moved out and away with another surge of sure, sweet power. His confidence had returned by now. He knew he was making back all the points he had lost on that motion picture machine. When all the scores were in, they'd see who would win. He couldn't be beaten behind the wheel. He had grown up behind the wheel, it was all he knew, and he couldn't be beaten.

The next test was taking its toll. Two rows of stakes had been set out to make a long S. On each stake was a small red rubber ball. The driver had to drive between the rows, making the S-turn. The rows of stakes were eight feet apart, to allow for the turns, and it was neces-

sary to run that gauntlet without knocking any balls off the stakes. The merest touch against a stake was enough to roll the ball off the top. The driver was not allowed to lean out of his car to find his way.

With only inches of clearance on each side, the driver crawled through the S-turn. He got around the first part of the turn without trouble, but then he wobbled. Making the second half of the turn he grazed the stakes on the right side and sent half a dozen red balls bouncing to the ground. The balls were put back, and Bud was motioned on.

Bud had been through too many tight spots with his own rod to let these two rows of stakes intimidate him. He'd had to judge his inches at eighty and ninety miles an hour, and they held no terror for him at ten. He nosed into the S-turn and sailed through it without a moment's hesitation. When he stopped at the other end, he looked back. Not a ball had been knocked off.

One of the judges appeared at Bud's window. "You're the first to go through without losing a point on balls," the judge said. "Too bad you forgot your signal. That cost you a point."

Bud looked bewildered. "What signal?"

"When you stopped. Don't ruin yourself with careless mistakes. Remember, hand signals count as though you were on the open road. Good luck, boy."

Bud drove on to the next test with his forehead pulled down in a frown of anger and worry. Hand signals! They expected him to put out his hand every time he stopped, turned. . . . Why hadn't he thought about that? It was just like them to demand something useless like signals when there wasn't any reason for making them. How many had he missed? He hadn't signalled a stop at the parallel parking test, nor had he signalled with his hand when unparking. Those two, with the point he'd just lost

made three points against him in the actual driving test. And he thought he'd been doing a perfect job. He had been doing perfectly. They were robbing him on unimportant technicalities that had nothing to do with handling a car, with really driving. But he'd show them. He'd signal. They wouldn't get him again.

The next test was taken over a strip of white tape six inches wide and a hundred feet long. Again, without looking out the side, the driver had to get his two left wheels on the tape and drive its length. Then, using his rear-vision mirror, or by turning his head, he had to back the length of the tape.

The tape was marked off in ten-foot sections. Any time a wheel went off the tape going forward, the driver lost two points. When a wheel left the tape backing up, he lost one point. The idea of the test was to determine how well the drivers had that left wheel and fender—the collision point—under control. Did they know exactly where their wheels were touching?

Bud came in on the tape straight on. Hesitation was fatal in this test. Again experience came to his aid. He remembered the many times he had driven cars on the grease racks on the garage, and made believe it was a grease rack ahead now. He made his choice, headed for his run, and went the length of the tape without slowing or allowing his wheels to wobble. This time he remembered to signal his stop. Then he moved forward, off the tape, and looking over his left shoulder, started on his way back. He went off twice, but since both happened in the same ten-foot stretch, he lost only a point.

From this point Bud breezed through the angle-parking test and the one in which it was necessary to drive across two twelve-inch planks over a deep, wide mud-hole, coming on them from a turn. The final test involved a row of five stanchions, set in a line about twenty feet

apart. The driver had to weave in and out between these posts, stop at the end, and back up, weaving in and out again. No pull-ups were allowed, and every stop cost a point.

It was simple. Bud sailed through going forward, and on the way back he wasn't forced to stop once. He had a wonderful eye for the amount of space he needed for the car he drove, and he put on an exhibition of driving that no other contestant could match.

Then it was over, and all he had to do was drive around and around the track, until he ran out of gas. Satisfied that he had out-pointed every other driver in the contest, Bud used every gas-saving trick he knew to make up for the fuel he had lost earlier, when he'd gunned his motor for no good reason.

Around and around he went, holding his speed down, though he wished he could be turned loose on the track with his own car. Soon he began to pass cars that had run out of gas. Then dejected drivers watched him roll by, but when they saw who he was, they weren't so discouraged. After all, Bud Crayne was expected to walk off with first money. Who could hope to lick Bud Crayne?

He rolled on, getting every inch of mileage out of the Chevvy. He'd worked hard on that motor, and the work was paying off. When his car sputtered to a stop, Bud had lapped the field, and knew that no one could touch the mileage he had registered. He turned off the key and relaxed, waiting for a judge to check his speedometer. He looked around to watch other drivers, and saw Chuck.

Chuck had come through all his tests—how, Bud didn't know—and was on the track. Slowly, steadily, taking advantage of every smooth foot of track, Chuck came on, passing stalled drivers and piling up mileage.

The slight grin of derision with which Bud had begun watching Chuck now faded from his lips. Chuck was

working his way around the track, passed Bud, and started on the one lap lead that Bud held. Bud watched intently, waiting for Chuck's car to stall with every turn of the wheels. But Chuck went on, as though he had a full tank. He made the first turn and came down the backstretch, went into the second turn and closed in on Bud. Twenty feet before he would have tied Bud, Chuck ran out of gas and stopped, his left arm out in a signal. He hadn't made it. Bud was still first—in mileage.

When all the tests had been run, the drivers went back to the stock pavilion to await the results. The big barn-like structure was filled with sound as drivers compared notes, groaned over mistakes learned too late, and tried to guess who would be second, after Bud Crayne.

Bud said nothing. He sat alone, as though his victory had set him apart from the others. He had won, he was sure of that, and he had proved to O'Day, Cole, and all the rest that he couldn't be beaten on the road, or behind the wheel. But there was little elation in Bud's heart. So he had won, had proven himself the best. What did it mean? Could anyone else, following in his footsteps, taking his advice, do the same? He remembered Jimmy and Kenny, and shuddered. He had proved that he himself was the top driver, and that was all.

The officials began announcing the awards. They began with the smallest prizes and worked toward the top. Bud listened with half an ear. He wondered if he should have a few words to say when he received first prize. Probably, but he didn't know what to say. He wasn't very good at giving speeches. The best thing would be to take the prize, thank the officials, and leave.

Fourth prize, third prize. They went to strangers. Bud frowned. Why hadn't Chuck won anything? He'd done a good job, as far as Bud had seen. Good enough to win one of the higher prizes.

Second prize. A name was called and Bud, expecting to hear Chuck's name, looked to see who would rise. The name was called again, and, for the first time, he heard it, but he refused to believe what he heard. "Second prize of one hundred dollars, won by Bud Crayne, of Avondale. Come up and get your prize, Bud. Don't be bashful. Come and get it."

He went because they were all looking at him, and he couldn't escape. He went down to the platform, his face red. They thought he was blushing in tongue-tied joy at winning second, and the judge joked with him about it. But Bud's head swam in a red haze of disbelief and protest. Who had beaten him? Who? *WHO?*

"First prize of two hundred dollars goes to the boy who will represent the county at the state-wide Roadeo. It gives me pleasure to award this prize to our outstanding young driver of the day . . . Chuck Liddell, also of Avondale. Come down and get your prize, Chuck, and our congratulations to you for. . . ."

Bud heard it all in stunned surprise. Chuck had won. How? How? It wasn't right. He'd been robbed. He'd been cheated. It wasn't fair. . . .

Someone was telling Bud that he was an alternate to the State Roadeo, but he didn't want to listen. Alternate . . . second best. . . . He was the best. He was the *best*.

Another official was talking to Bud. "Great exhibition of driving, son. Almost a perfect score behind the wheel. Too bad you lost so many points on the Driverometer and forgetting to signal. The little things beat you, son. Just the little ones."

So that was it. That was how he'd been beaten. Not fair and square behind the wheel, but with little snide tricks that stole points because he hadn't given needless signals, and hadn't been allowed to drive his way on the Driverometer. That was how they'd kept him out of first place.

He stood there with the blood turning his face dark red, his head down. Anger and a feeling of disgrace mingled within him, and with them a new feeling. A kind of bottomless despair that turned his life blank. The shock was wearing off and he realized for the first time the enormity of the thing that had happened to him. He, Bud Crayne, had been whipped in a driving contest by a beginner! He, who had devoted his life to skillful driving, he had been whipped by Chicken Liddell!

The officials, mistaking Bud's shock and anger as the bashful blushing of a tongue-tied country boy, patted him on the shoulder and told him to look up and smile.

On the way out, walking dumbly to Ralph's car for the ride home, Bud was stopped by Ted O'Day and Mr. Cole. He stood before them silently, not wanting to talk.

"Congratulations, Bud," Mr. Cole said. "You surprised me."

Bud was alert for a tone of mockery in Mr. Cole's voice, but there was none.

"I didn't think you'd win anything, the way you started. I'm glad to see how quickly you can learn—if you want to."

"I wasn't beaten in the driving," Bud said through stubborn lips. "Not behind the wheel. Look at the scores."

"You're absolutely right, Bud," the little teacher said. "You're right. I told you that long ago. Remember? I said you had victory in your hands and defeat under your hat. Your thinking beat you. Your attitude, and nothing else. But that's all over and done with. I'm really proud of the way you stuck to your guns, even if it was the stubborn thing to do."

Ted O'Day nodded. The big patrolman put his hand on Bud's shoulder. "Maybe next year, Bud. You'll be



eligible if you stay out of trouble. Because of your good record today, you'll be allowed to drive again. It will be a kind of probation for another year, but you can drive."

That meant something to Bud. He thought of his car, and the long months it had sat idle. As soon as he got home, he'd go out on the road. Then he could think it all through. Then everything would make sense. "Thanks," Bud said, looking at the ground. "Thanks." But there was no emotion in his words. Drawn in his shell like a turtle, he walked on toward My-Son-Ralph's Chevvy, his hands in his pockets, his shoulders hunched, his boots kicking up dust.

"And now?" Ted O'Day asked.

"I think we've won everyone else in Avondale to our way of thinking," Mr. Cole said. "We still have to get Bud."

"Will we?"

"I don't know. He's just hit the deck with an awful crash. It's in him whether he bounces or shatters."

Bud reached the car to find Ralph behind the wheel. When Bud got in Ralph started the motor. "Tough luck, Bud. I thought you had it in the bag."

"I did, until they cheated me out of it. They didn't want me to win."

"You were judged the same as anyone else," Ralph said. "Weren't you?"

"Attitude," Bud grunted. "They said my attitude beat me. Nuts. Was this a driving contest or a matching of attitudes? Attitude!"

"I can see their point," Ralph said, turning on the road that led to Avondale. "Golly, I was so far behind I was hardly in the contest. I thought I was a pretty good driver, but. . . ."

"You are a good driver," Bud said. "I've driven with you. I know. You do all right."

Ralph chuckled. "I guess so. Especially since my father keeps my mistakes from getting before the judge. Very handy, a father who goes to bat for his son."

Bud stared moodily at the road. "Let's get home in a hurry."

"Why?"

"I can drive again," Bud said. "They told me I could drive. I'm going out as soon as I get home."

"Why the hurry?"

"I've got my reasons," Bud said. "Step on it, will you?"

"Okay." Ralph stepped on it. "If we get picked up, Papa will take care of me, and you're just a passenger. Here we go."

\* \* \* \* \*

It was dark when they reached Avondale. Bud had been silent all the way in since he had asked for more speed, and Ralph felt relieved when he could drop Bud and go home.

Bud ran into the garage, allowing himself to come to life now that he was alone. "Second," he cried at his car as though it could hear and appreciate his situation. "Second, Baby, second."

Bud slid behind the wheel and sat there for a long moment with his eyes closed. It felt so good to be back in the old familiar saddle that he almost cried. He touched the wheel, the upholstery, the knobs on the dash, his hands tender and loving. "We're going out tonight, Baby," Bud crooned. "Just you and me, like we used to. Anxious to get going, Baby? In a minute. We'll show them who's best, Baby. We've shown them before and we can show them again, can't we? They cheated, Baby. They cheated. But we'll show them. We'll show them all."

His gleaming motor came to life and the dual pipes throbbed with waiting power. "We'll show them," Bud

whispered as he felt the power that was his once more. "Let's go, Baby. Let's go where we can talk and think."

Bud drove out of the garage slowly, savoring the speed that was under his foot for the asking. He drove out of town slowly, forcing himself to keep his speed down, like a small boy saving the cake frosting until last.

Then, little by little, he opened up. As his speed increased so did his anger and disappointment spring into flame from smoldering embers in his heart. Faster he went, and faster, driving his car ahead in a wild roaring burst of speed that almost shook it apart.

Down the dark roads he sped, his tires howling, the wind buffeting him as in a gale. Where was it? Where was the release of tension, the forgetfulness, the detachment from the world and its frustrations? Where were the easy answers that had always come to him when on the fly?

Speed had been his drug and he took massive doses to soothe him now. Faster and faster, blindly roaring along stretches and fighting turns. Could they match him now? Could they? Where was Chicken Liddell now? What would Chicken do? Chicken would crouch against the seat, beg for mercy, plead with Bud to slow down. Chicken would cry that Bud was best, and whimper to be let out. He would! He would! Bud Crayne was best!

Why didn't the magic of speed in the night envelop him in its spell? How much faster did he have to drive to forget? To wipe out the disgrace and ease the pain? Fly, Baby, fly! Bud Crayne was on the road, faster and better than anyone else. Who dared challenge Bud Crayne? Fly, fly, Baby! Roar! Bud Crayne was . . . *second best*.

Second best, second best, second best. . . . His own wheels mocked him as they flew over the expansion joints in the pavement. *Second best, second best, second best. . . .*

"First!" Bud screamed aloud. "First!"

But he wasn't first. It would be in the newspapers, on the radio, on records stored in vaults for a hundred years. The County Rodeo had been run off, and Bud Crayne was *second*. Why? No one would ask why, no one would investigate to find out how he had been cheated. They would only know that Chuck Liddell had been first, and Bud Crayne second.

Beaten by a novice who hadn't been driving six full months. The disgrace . . . the disgrace. . . . How could he ever go home and face his friends? How could he live? They would laugh behind his back. They would be glad he had been beaten, just as he had beaten them. The facts of his defeat would be called excuses. Second best. Bud Crayne? That's him. He was supposed to win the Rodeo but came in second. He was licked by a kid they call Chicken Liddell, who'd just learned to drive.

More than Bud's pride was taking a beating on this wild careening ride through the night. Always, it seemed, his life had been based on the fact that no matter what else anyone could do, Bud Crayne was tops behind the wheel. Were others fine students? Bud Crayne only had driven one hundred and twenty miles an hour. Was this boy a star athlete? Bud Crayne could turn a square corner with a car at seventy. Was that boy good-looking? Bud Crayne could fix anything that was wrong with your car. Did another boy have a fine home? Bud Crayne had a fast car. Name anyone's treasure, ability or possession, Bud Crayne was king of the road, king of speed, king of the motors and the wheel.

*The King is dead, long live the King.*

And now that the old King was deposed, now that there was another King of the wheel, what would the old King do? If he was second in driving, if he, Bud Crayne was second in driving, in what could he be first? In nothing. Nothing. The King was dead, his chariot squeaked, and

the former monarch could be seen any day after school at Jake Clymer's garage, where he performed odd jobs.

Faster, faster, ever faster. Somehow he had turned, and was on the long stretch home. Down went his foot to the floorboards. The motor strained and whined, the pipes seemed to rip the highway like a knife. Faster, faster, bucking, rocking, floating to the right and left while the speedometer climbed to a hundred and beyond. Faster, faster, faster. Regain thy kingdom, O, King! In the screech and lurch and fury, in thy death-agony! Flee blindly like a harpooned whale, bring death and destruction to all that lies in thy frenzied heart-bursting flight to . . . death.

To death. Bud's foot lifted abruptly. He came back to his senses with a start, frightened at the tremendous speed he had attained. Even with his foot off the gas pedal he rushed through the night at a speed that was beyond him and terrified him. And clinging to the wheel, holding to the middle of the road, he allowed his over-heated, worn-out car to run down in silence, with only the shrill call of the wind in his ears, and the terrible thought in his mind. . . . *Nothing had happened.*

Nothing had happened. He had run his fastest, wildest race. He had reached a speed above and beyond any he had ever before attempted. And nothing had happened. The old solace, the old ease, the old thrill of speed that surpassed every other emotion . . . where had they gone?

Nothing had happened. He had driven blindly, crazily, he would have killed anyone had he met them on the road. He had given himself up to speed to take or leave, and it had left him. He had found nothing at the peak but fear, he felt nothing now but frustration, confusion and loss.

He had gone to another world and returned, but noth-

ing on earth had changed. Bud Crayne was still second best.

Bud drove home slowly. There was no thrill to the wheel, no kick in the power he commanded. He drove fast once again for a brief stretch, then slowed again. It was gone. Whatever the wheel had been to him in the past, it meant nothing now. There would be no more daily sessions on the road, no more races, no more squate turns, no more sacrifices for a chrome cam or a set of carburetors.

Driving had lost its thrill, its charm, its challenge and its peculiar rewards. The only thing in life that had meant anything to him at all had been taken from him. The one thing that had buoyed him, comforted him and interested him was a dead thing. The hop-up and the fast turn were part of a dim dead past, another life. He was an empty shell, emptied of all he had prized and cherished. What would there be to take its place?

## Chapter 10

THE SPRING night was mild and warm. The moon was out, playing a lazy game of hide-and-seek from behind thick soft clouds that floated idly in the currents of upper wind. Along the freshening face of the earth the gentle wind drove little herds of spring scents. The delicate odors of new grass and blossoms and reviving trees and hidden wild flowers skipped gracefully before the herdsman wind, nimbly leaped fences, scaled walls, tumbled close-packed through streets and roads and pranced unseen through houses. Some came by where Walt Thomas lived, tickled his nostrils, and ran off leaving him restless, suddenly thinking of LaVerne. Walt stood up.

"Where to now, Walter?" His father's question was really an order to sit down.

"Town," Walt replied.

"It's late, Walter."

"Not for town," Walt answered. The big clock in the farm parlor ticked, pages rustled as his father turned his farm journal to read about hogs.

"Late's late, Walter. Town or country. What's the attraction in town?"

"To see my friends," Walt said sullenly. He hadn't forgotten his father's orders that had kept him from the Roadeo.

"Walter," Mr. Thomas said without looking up from his journal, "where do you think I'd be today if I'd spent all my time hanging around 'town'?"

Walt didn't answer.

"Town never raised a hog or harvested a bushel of grain," Mr. Thomas continued. "Town didn't buy this

farm. Go to bed, Walter. You need your sleep. We rise early on the farm, and a sleepy hand is half a hand."

"I do my share of the work," Walt said. "And I guess I'm big enough to spend my nights the way I want to."

"Walter. You are speaking to your father."

"It's true," Walt said. "I do more work than any man you could hire. You wouldn't let me go to the Roadeo. . . ."

"Roadeo." The word was heavy with contempt.

"I might have won a prize," Walt said bitterly, "But you wouldn't let me go. But I can go now. And I'll go if I want to."

"Walter. . . ."

"It's bad enough to stay on the farm all day, without having to sit around the parlor all night. I'm going to see my friends."

Walt turned and stalked out, almost tearful with rage. His father wouldn't say anything. Not as long as he was getting all the work out of Walt there was to be had. Walt knew he was big and strong, and worked hard. He was doing a man's work on the farm, and by golly, he'd have a man's privilege of going out when he wanted to.

Walt jumped in his car, turned around in the yard, and gunned for the road. He'd missed the Roadeo, and he might have won a prize. He might have won first prize, and gone to the state contest. How did anybody know? Maybe he'd have won the scholarship.

Walt reached the main highway and turned toward town, pushing his foot down. He was just wasting his life on the farm, that was all. Stuck out there in the country with no friends, and nothing to do at night but sit around. There wasn't anything to do in town, but it was something just to see people and talk, even if they were always



making fun of him. It was better to be unpopular and made fun of than sit home alone and read about hogs.

Friends. . . . He wanted friends, but nobody seemed to want him any more. The fellows who were out of school were gone, and those still in school didn't want him butting in. He knew that. The only thing there was to do in Avondale was go to Pop's and shoot pool, but since Pop sold beer, he couldn't go there, either.

He could go to Jake's and hang around with Bud, Bud wasn't so high and mighty now since he'd not won the Roadeo. He could rub it in to old Bud now, and Bud didn't even have the spunk to fight back. Served old Bud right. And LaVerne. She was going with Ralph now. Since she'd switched once, she might switch again. He liked that LaVerne. If he could have her, he'd be happy enough to stay home. Darn his father anyway, keeping him out of the Roadeo. He'd show them all. He'd leave Avondale. Maybe go to California. What a night. Boy, if he just had LaVerne along. Just the two of them. . . .

Ram around Ninety-Mile-Curve, tear along to the underpass. Slow under that underpass, and full gun up the hill. Slide into Jake's gravel with the wheels locked. Shower gravel all over Bud. Spray them all with gravel. Walt Thomas was on the prowl. Bud Crayne had lost his place, and maybe Walt Thomas would take over. Yeah, that was the answer, He'd be as popular as Bud used to be if he just took Bud's place as the speed king. He'd see about buying Bud's rod, too. That was the answer. Speed. . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

My-Son-Ralph Osler paused at the front door. "Yes, 'father?'"

"Going out, son?"

"For a while. I thought I'd visit Bud. He's been in the dumps since he didn't win the Roadeo."

"I don't see why he feels that way. After all, you didn't win either, and if my son Ra. . . ."

"See you later, Dad," Ralph said hastily.

"All right, my boy. Be careful. I've talked to the authorities about the highway patrol picking on you every time you're on the road, and they've promised to do something about it. But you do your part, too. I promised them you would. I said that my son Ra. . . ."

"'Night," Ralph called as he ran out. He jumped in his car and started it. He was happy. So happy he felt like yelling, standing on his hands, knocking down a brick building or doing loops. It was all set for him to go to the State University in the fall. They told him he was a cinch for the varsity in his sophomore year, and would probably wind up as an all-Big Ten or All-American before he was through school. After that, maybe he'd go into pro ball, or coach. Whatever he did, the future lay before him bright and inviting. College! Basketball! Fraternity life! His dad had promised him a new car when he started college. And spending money. And clothes. It was perfect. Perfect.

Ralph war-whooped in delight as he raced through Avondale and brought up at Jake's garage with his wheels dragging. What a night! What a night for a run through the country! There had to be some loud wild way in which he could express his happiness. Ah, Walt Thomas was there. Have to kid old Walt and make him mad. Old farmery Lard Thomas. Always good for a laugh. He'd rise to a gag like a trout to a fly. He never caught on. Poor old dumb Lard Thomas and his poor old dumb car.

\* \* \* \*

Marge Anderson sat on LaVerne's bed and played with

one of LaVerne's new dolls. LaVerne sat before her mirror, applying make-up.

"This is a pretty doll," Marge said. "Where did you get it?"

"My-Son-Ralph got it for me when we went to Greenfield."

"He's nice," Marge sighed.

"Oh, he's all right," LaVerne said in a bored tone. "Not bad for a small town." She began painting her lip rouge on with a brush, the way the Hollywood stars did.

"He's not bad for any town," Marge said, holding the doll close in an unconscious maternal gesture. "I wish he wanted to go with me."

"Mmmhmm." LaVerne made a sound with her lips tight. "Maybe I'll will him to you."

"Where do you think *you're* going?" Marge asked, her round flat face showing signs of spirit. "And what makes you think you can will anyone to me, or that I need you to do it?"

"Don't get angry," LaVerne said. "But you know how it is."

"You sure gave Bud the air," Marge said. "Just when he needed you, too."

LaVerne laughed. "Did he tell you that?"

"No, but I can see it."

"Oh . . . piffle. Bud and I just weren't meant for one another. Anyway, why should you complain? You seem to have taken my place."

"No, I haven't," Marge said with quiet dignity. "You never cared to hear about his work with motors, and I do. That's all I am to Bud. Just someone to talk to about motors. But he's kind of quit doing that lately. He seems awful blue because you threw him over."

"I noticed," LaVerne said with some satisfaction. "Well,

I guess it's my destiny to break hearts. Ralph's will be next."

"Ralph?"

"Certainly. You don't expect me to drag him along to Hollywood, do you?"

"When are you going *there*?" Marge scoffed.

"You'll see." LaVerne was very mysterious, as though she knew a great secret. "After the school play, when the talent scout sees me. . . ."

Marge shook her head. "LaVerne, you've told that fib about the talent scout so much, you believe it yourself."

"You'll see," LaVerne repeated, giving her all to the scene. "You'll believe me when I send you a postcard from Hollywood and you're in Greenfield seeing my movies."

"I'll believe it when I see it," Marge said. "Come on, stop looking at yourself in the mirror."

"I," LaVerne said with a queenly turn, "have something to look at. Come, darling, we mustn't keep our public waiting."

They went down the stairs together. LaVerne made a grand exit to the street, and with Marge half a step behind, turned toward Jake's garage, where the boys would be if they were in town.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chuck Liddell came down from his room and went into the living room where his parents were reading. "Okay if I walk over to see Bud for a few minutes?" Chuck asked. "Maybe I can cheer him up a little. He hasn't been himself since I . . . since he didn't win first at the Rodeo."

"All right, Chuck," his mother said.

"Don't let him teach you to be a speed demon," Chuck's father said, smiling. "I've seen him on the road. Reminds me of when I was a youngster and had the fastest horse and buggy in the county. We used to. . . . Well, it seems

pretty tame now, but I thought I was a pretty reckless young lad."

"Until your horse ran away with you, and you had to be rescued. Remember?" Chuck's mother winked at him.

"No, no, it wasn't like that at all. I had full control of the animal, Clara. It was just that the spectators didn't understand I was giving an exhibition of old Roman chariot racing, and called for help. I was certainly embarrassed when my horse was stopped and I was 'rescued' as you call it."

Chuck laughed. "So you were a 'hot horse' driver in your day, eh, Dad? You're cautious enough now."

"I outgrew my wild craving for speeds up to twenty miles an hour," Mr. Liddell said. "Just like everyone else who went through that stage. It's a little harder to live through these days. A fast car is much more of a killer than a fast horse used to be."

"Don't worry, Dad. I won't follow in your footsteps," Chuck grinned.

Chuck's mother followed him to the door. "Invite Bud over for Sunday dinner," she said. "Poor boy, I've felt so sorry for him growing up without a real family, I've thought a thousand times of adopting him."

"Why don't you . . . or why didn't you?"

"We tried, but it didn't go through. It's too bad. He looks as though he could have been an awfully nice boy."

"Oh, he is, Mom. Really. He's swell."

"A trifle wild for my taste," Mrs. Liddell said. "And that awful hat he wears. I do hope he changes clothes for dinner Sunday."

Chuck laughed. "I think his good suit is just like the one he always wears, but he might have an unpinned hat. I'll ask him over, Mom. Thanks for thinking about it."

He walked down the front walk and out into the street. Poor old Bud, he was sure taking his defeat the hard way.

Too bad he'd never had time for school sports. He'd have learned how to lose. He'd only learned how to win. Well, Chuck thought, maybe I can give him some pointers on how to lose gracefully. I'll offer to trade that for some pointers on how I can win the State Rodeo. That one will really be tough.

And Chuck headed for the lights of Jake's garage, whistling softly, breathing in the sweet night air, and feeling a wonderful sense of contentment and well-being. It was great to be alive. Really great.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jake Clymer stretched, yawned, and looked at the garage clock. He began slipping out of his soiled coveralls. A minute later Bud walked in.

"Had your supper, Bud?"

"Uh huh."

Jake looked at the clock again. "You got back on time."

"As usual," Bud said dully.

"Yes, sir," Jake said cheerfully. "Since you quit riding around in that jalopy of yours, I can't tell when you're coming back. Used to be I could hear you coming two miles away and have my coveralls off and hands washed by the time you got here. Don't hear you now until your boots hit the gravel."

"Uh huh." Bud took his coveralls from the wall. "What's to be done?"

"Nothing except sit. I finished her all myself."

"Good deal." Bud hung his coveralls back on the hook.

"Well," Jake said, rubbing his hands together, "it's home to a home-cooked supper. Nothing like home cooking, Bud. Marry a good cook, Bud. They say your appetite's the last to go, and when your woman's fat and gray and don't talk except to scold you, a good beef roast and

apple pie tastes as good to you as on the day you start your honeymoon."

"Uh huh." Bud sat down and put his booted feet on a low stool in front of him. He leaned back against the garage wall and closed his eyes.

"Yes, sir, yes, sir," Jake said briskly, hoping to rouse the boy from his lethargy. "Nothing like good home-cooked roast beef and home-made apple pie. Time you get out of school and be my partner, you can think of finding a good cook too, Bud. One of these years I'll be ready to retire, and you can be just like me. Yes, sir."

"Uh huh." The prospect of being "just like" Jake chilled Bud to the heart. But Jake was right. Another twenty-thirty years and he would be just like Jake—if he was lucky.

"And Bud . . ."

"Yeah?"

"See if you can keep the crowd down a little. I don't mind a few boys, but you know how it is with a crowd of them around. Ladies don't like to get out of their cars and it hurts business."

"Okay, Jake. I know. I'll chase them. "

"Just try to keep it down, Bud."

"Good night," Bud said.

"Bunch of boys out there, it looks . . ."

"Good night," Bud repeated. "Your beef will get cold."

"Yeah, yeah," Jack said. "Well, good night, Bud."

At last he left. Bud opened his eyes and watched Jake hurry home, afraid his wife would scold him if he was late. Yep, he could be just like Jake if he wanted to. Even if he didn't want to. What other future was there for him?

Left alone, Bud turned his head and stared at his cut-down little car. It squatted in a corner, pointing toward him. He stared steadily, wonderingly. Why? Why?

He hadn't driven since the night of his wild, desperate,

lonely run after losing first place in the Roadeo. Several times he'd got in and started the motor, but he hadn't driven. The very sound of its motor mocked him, and he couldn't forget the *second best, second best, second best* tune his tires had played on the road. It was gone. The old thrills and sweet moments on the road were over. There was no joy, no thrill, no satisfaction. Why? Why?

His car had let him down. The one time when he had needed it most, when a lonely night ride *had* to show him the way to work things out, his car had failed him. The one thing in the world he had counted on never to fail him. Why? Why?

Bud stared at his little car, accusing it with his eyes, but it remained immobile, dumb, and strange. Something had come between them. Something had destroyed their partnership. What? How? Why?

A bob-tailed muffler snorted in the distance, and in a few minutes, as Bud knew he would, Walt Thomas slid up to the gas pumps with his wheels locked, then jumped out to look for Bud, a scornful, mocking grin already curving his heavy lips. So what? Bud thought tiredly. So what?

"Give me five regular," Walt ordered as he walked into the garage. "Check my oil, too."

Bud rose wordlessly and went out to the pump with Walt at his heels. He unscrewed the gas tank cap and inserted the nozzle of the hose into the opening. The gallons clicked in.

"Say, Bud, I wanted to ask you."

"Yeah?" Bud lifted the hood and measured the oil.

"If you're thinking of selling your rod, I'd like to buy it."

"What made you think it was for sale?"

"You were going to sell it once, and since you don't drive any more. . . ."



"It's not for sale."

"Okay. But if you change your. . . ."

"It won't be for sale."

"Well don't get huffy. I only asked."

Bud took Walt's money and made change. Since there was nothing doing in the garage, Bud sat down in the service station office, his feet propped against a cold wood stove, Walt dropped a nickel in the pinball machine and started playing. A moment later My-Son-Ralph drove up, then LaVerne came in with Marge, and they were followed by Chuck Liddell. The room filled with random talk. Bud took no part in the conversation. Other boys and girls drifted in, until the place was packed.

Ralph watched Walt play the pinball machine and LaVerne stood close to Ralph. Marge drifted across the room to talk to Bud, but she kept watching Chuck. She thought Chuck was the handsomest boy in town, and she also thought he liked her. He was always nice. But she stood by Bud, so Chuck wouldn't think she was chasing him.

Walt's loud aggressive voice boomed out above the other sounds. "You can stick around here if you want to," he was saying to someone. "Avondale might be good enough for you and people like Bud, but it's not for me. I'm thinking of heading for California."

LaVerne heard that. She'd been listening to Ralph tell about his big future in college basketball, and she heard what Walt had said. Her mind was busy. Ralph was going to college, but Walt was thinking of California. California meant Hollywood, and if she could get there with Walt, that was as good as any other way. Bud was out of the picture, Ralph was out, and Walt could move in—if he was telling the truth. She moved toward Walt. "When are you going to California?" she scoffed.

"Sooner than you think," Walt said, noticing LaVerne's

interest. He didn't know why it interested her, but it had, and he wanted to keep her interest. "Maybe in a couple of weeks. I'm sick of the farm and this part of the country. I'm my own boss, I've got a car and money, and I aim to get around." Walt looked at her with challenging eyes. "Want to go along?"

"Maybe." LaVerne's tone was casual, but her eyes were bright with interest. Walt noticed, and his heart beat faster. LaVerne had never looked at him like that before. Maybe for the first time she was seeing that he was a better guy to tie up with than Bud or Ralph. She stayed by him, and seemed to be waiting for him to say or do something.

"Guess I'll go out and give my Hudson a beating," Walt announced, hitching up his pants. "Anybody here care for a little excitement?" He looked at LaVerne.

My-Son-Ralph took him up. "I feel like celebrating," Ralph said. "Let's have a rat race or something."

"You'll get caught," someone warned. "You'll miss next year's Rodeo if you get a ticket."

"Next year I'll be in California," Walt boasted. "I don't care about a ticket."

"And my father will fix mine," Ralph said cheerfully, "so I don't care, either. Who's coming with me?"

"I will," LaVerne said, moving to Ralph's side. Walt was thunder-struck. He had assumed she would want to ride with him. LaVerne knew that, but she didn't want to be won over too easily. She wanted Walt to work for his prize.

Walt looked around angrily. "Anybody riding with me?" A couple of people yelled they would. "Pile in," Walt ordered. Then to Ralph. "Tell you what, Ralph. You take off first, and I'll give you a five-minute head start. Then I'll hunt you. I have to catch you in thirty minutes to win. Okay?"

"Sounds like fun," Ralph said grinning. "You'll find me a hard fox to find."

"We'll see," Walt answered, his face red with excitement. "Get going."

LaVerne got in Ralph's car in the front seat. She looked back and saw that Marge hadn't followed. Marge was content to stay back with Chuck, but LaVerne motioned to her. Marge went to the car.

"Come on, Chuck," LaVerne called. "Come with us."

"I want to talk to Bud," Chuck said.

Bud came to life for a moment. "I don't feel like talking. Go ahead."

"No." Chuck stuck to his refusal. "I don't care for those games."

"Go on, Chicken," Walt whooped. "Just because you won the Roadeo you don't have to feel so much better than anyone else."

"It's not that, Walt. I don't feel that way. I don't care for. . . ."

Marge, who sat alone in the rear of Ralph's car, plucked up her courage. "There's plenty of room back here, Chuck."

Chuck looked at her. He ignored the needling he was getting from the others and saw the unconcealed, unashamed pleading in Marge's eyes. He felt sorry for Marge. Poor kid, nobody ever went with her or tried to be nice to her. Begging in public for someone to ride with her. "Okay," he said. "I'll go, but it's not my idea of fun."

"What else is there to do?" Ralph asked, starting his motor. There was no answer to that. Chuck sat back and looked at Marge with a smile. She smiled back, her heart in her eyes. She was riding alone in the back with Chuck. It was the first time she had ever really been alone with him—or with anyone else. Maybe he'd find out what a nice person she was even if she wasn't pretty. It would be

something if Chuck became her boy friend. Even La-Verne had never done that well. Anything might happen. In the movies homely girls often won good-looking boys because the girls weren't homely at all, they only looked homely. Perhaps love would make her beautiful too. This ride might be the beginning of a new life.

Marge and Chuck were thrown together as Ralph dug away from the station, going after every foot of lead he could build up in five minutes. Behind him, anxious for the chase, Walt gunned his Hudson and looked at his watch. The time for action was near.

## Chapter 11

MY-SON-RALPH roared along a twisting dirt road. He skidded around corners, took every turn and intersection as fast as he dared, and doubled back on his own trail. The others in the car watched for Walt's lights.

Ralph slowed down, drove to the side of the road, and parked where his car was hidden from the road by a thick clump of bushes. He laughed softly. Walt hadn't caught him yet.

"What are you stopping for?" LaVerne asked.

"Can't hear anything when we're driving," Ralph answered. "Let's get out and listen. If we hear where Walt's going, we can figure out how to miss him."

Ralph got out of the car, listening, and the others joined him. They stood quietly in the darkness, holding their breath, as though Walt could hear normal breathing. The idea of being hunted, of hiding in the night, was exciting. Their eyes gleamed, and they giggled. They listened.

The only sounds that came to them were the noises of nature. The sound of wind in the trees, of waving grass, of farm animals moving in the darkness, of small wild creatures scurrying in the hunt for food.

"I don't hear his motor," Ralph whispered. "He must be doing this, too. Waiting to catch our sound or find our lights."

The others nodded, looking about them as though expecting to see Walt and his Hudson appear in a burst of light and sound.

"Tell you what we'll do," Ralph whispered. "We'll fool him and get back to Bud's. When he gives up looking for us, we'll have the laugh on him."

"How?" LaVerne giggled delightedly.

"I'll drive to the highway with my lights off. I can see by the moon, and I'll go slow, so they can't hear us. Then we'll make a run for it."

"Good."

"Take it easy," Chuck warned.

"Caution's the word," Ralph said. "Get in."

The four young people got in the car and Ralph started off slowly, as he had promised. There was no traffic on this back road, and it was easy to see the white path it made. Like a shadow the car moved onward, quietly, triumphantly. Ralph made the main highway. "Now for the run," he said gleefully.

The car picked up speed as he tromped down on the gas. "Hey," Chuck complained, "you forgot to turn on your lights."

"It's okay," Ralph answered, hitting close to seventy. "I can see the road as well as in daylight, and if anyone's coming, we'll see their lights. Then I'll turn on mine."

"I don't like it," Chuck said.

"We'll be there in a minute, and you can get out."

Ralph had his car wide open, and he held it there. The car passed seventy and touched seventy-five. In the dark, without lights, it seemed like a hundred. At seventy-five the car began to shake, and an outside rear-vision mirror, not too well secured, made a regular clicking sound. The motor whined, the wheels moaned on the pavement, the wheel vibrated in Ralph's hands. He was afraid, but he didn't let up. The speed and sound seemed to hypnotize him. He eased over into the middle of the road, straddling the middle line to be safe. Ninety-Mile-Curve loomed ahead.

Marge and Chuck were no longer sitting down. They leaned over the back of the front seat and stared at the road and at the speedometer. The car shook from side to side, the windows rattled. Marge let her purse fall to the

floor as she stared at the unlit road with fascinated eyes.

"I'll get it." Chuck saw it fall and bent to pick it up. Hunting, he got down on his knees. He could feel the terrible strain of speed as Ralph rocketed through the night without mercy. A howling, grinding sound bounced back from the road into the car. Chuck's hand closed over the purse, and for a moment his back was against the back of the front seat. At that moment Ralph hit Ninety-Mile-Curve at top speed, confident he couldn't be caught before he reached Bud's. As he went into the turn the spring moon was hidden for a moment behind a thick dark cloud, and shadows seemed to come to life on the turn. . . .

Walt Thomas was angry. He'd hunted and chased up one road and down another, and there hadn't been a sign of Ralph. Walt's heavy features were set in a scowl as he rammed his way recklessly over one road and then another. He had to catch Ralph. He had to show everyone—LaVerne—just how good he was. He had an idea and came to a stop.

"What are you stopping for?" A voice from the back seat.

"Shut up." Walt got out and stood with his head down, listening. If he could only hear Ralph's motor, he'd know how to find him. There was no sound. Walt turned back to his car. Ralph had stopped, and was hiding. He'd have to be rooted out somehow.

Walt was getting in his car when he heard a motor, a gunned motor. He placed it in a minute. Ralph was back on the highway, racing for Avondale. Walt almost whooped for joy as he threw his Hudson into motion. He was on a side road that was between Ninety-Mile-Curve and Avondale. He would do better than catch Ralph—he'd intercept him.

Walt's Hudson slewed and swayed as he drove fiercely

toward the highway. The ferocity of his manner quieted the others in the car. They hung on and hoped Walt wouldn't roll over on the turns. Sprays of stones and gravel banged against the underside of the car as it tore forward.

As Walt approached the main highway he cut his lights. If Ralph saw lights he would run, and perhaps lose himself again. This way it would be sudden, and the pounce of victory could not be eluded.

Walt went on the main highway and turned south with his wheels screeching. He opened up as he bore down toward Ninety-Mile-Curve. Once he got around that he would meet Ralph coming in, flash his lights, and blow a victory blast on his horn. Walt grinned without mirth as he pushed his foot down to the floor and drove by moonlight. Was Ralph Osler in for a big surprise!

As Walt headed into Ninety-Mile-Curve he was doing better than seventy. His eyes were narrowed, watching for some sign of Ralph's lights. Ralph couldn't have turned off on some dark road. He *couldn't* have. Walt had to see. He pushed for more speed as he went into the big turn. The kids in the back seat were screaming with laughter over some joke as the moon moved behind a cloud, and Walt Thomas eased to the middle of the road to be safe. His eyes adjusted to the darkness just in time to see the sightless eyes of Ralph's car swim out of the night like some monster from the depths of the sea with its black mouth opened wide to devour him.

Bud listened to the sound of Walt's motor fade in the night. Others were driving and having fun, and they hadn't won the Roadeo. Why had the loss made him feel incompetent? That's why he didn't drive any more. He'd lost faith in his ability to handle a car.

Bud looked up as a car drove on the gravel outside and



stopped. A moment later Ted O'Day came in. As far as Bud knew, this was a casual visit, but it had been planned between Ted and Guy Cole. They knew he'd quit driving, and they knew why. Bud was flat on his back, so to speak, and they wanted him in the fight again. His morale was shot, he had sunk into indifference. The teacher and the patrolman planned to catch Bud at this lowest point in his life and try to build up again, into something strong and positive. The first step was to help Bud regain faith in his abilities.

"Howdy, Bud," O'Day said cheerfully. "How's business?"

"Fair."

"Closing up soon?"

"About now."

"Good," Ted said. "I'm off duty now myself. I'd like to take you up on an offer you made once."

"What's that?"

"A spin in your rod. How about taking me out for a drive? Forget I'm a cop, and show me what you've done with that motor. I'd like to know."

"I don't drive it any more," Bud said.

"Come on, just this one time."

A look of something like fear came into Bud's eyes as he thought of the road. "I'd rather not. Please." His voice sounded strained.

O'Day pretended not to notice. "Just five minutes, Bud. Be a good sport."

Bud thought about it for a while. "Okay," he said reluctantly. "Just for a couple of minutes. Why don't you drive?"

"You," Ted said. "You know how to handle that rod. I'd be lost."

Bud felt a flicker of pride. He couldn't help smiling.

"It's my baby," he said fondly. "I guess I am the only one who knows how to treat it."

Bud felt awkward as they drove off in his car. They took it easy on the road, loafing along. Ted kept up a running comment on the fine qualities of Bud's car, noticing little important things that the ordinary rider missed.

"I'm heading for home," Bud said after a while.

"Oh, no," O'Day protested. "Show me a little speed."

Bud shook his head. "I don't want to drive fast. I can't."

"Why not?"

"I've lost my touch," Bud said. "I tried. I can't do it. I don't have the old feel any more."

"Nonsense," Ted answered. "You've talked yourself into a dither, that's all. Let's see some action."

"I can't," Bud repeated dully. "I can't. I lost the touch."

"Try to get it back," Ted urged. "Aren't you going to do anything about it?"

Bud looked at him. "I tried. It won't come back. I guess there's nothing left but to work at Jake's. In twenty-three years I can be just like him."

"I know it was hard to lose, Bud," O'Day said softly. "A guy doesn't get a chance at a college scholarship every day. But there's next year. . . ."

"Why try?" Bud asked, his voice tight. "I lost this year. To a beginner. I'll never be any better. Never. I lost. I . . ."

Bud turned toward O'Day with his mouth open. "Did you hear that?"

"I did." O'Day's face and voice were grim. "Go to it, Bud. We may be needed."

Bud speeded up. He drove over the country road they had been traveling until it reached the highway, and then turned toward town. At Ninety-Mile-Curve his lights

showed what they had heard. It was as though a bomb had been dropped on the two cars, and Bud's headlights illuminated what was left of Ralph's car, and Walt's car, and of the people who had been riding with them.

The crushed pile of twisted metal that had once been My-Son-Ralph's Chevvy was on its back in the ditch, its wheels up like the paws of a dead dog. Two of the wheels were smashed, and two were turning slowly. Something that looked like a limp, ripped-open bag of laundry hung halfway out of a rear window. That was Marge.

The motor of Ralph's car had been driven back through the frame of the car, and its weight had made a fatal spear of the steering column. Somewhere in the mashed tangle of metal, wood and torn upholstery was Ralph. And deeper yet in the pile of mangled steel, wedged in between jagged sheet steel on one side, and red hot metal on the other, was what had been the shapely black head and dainty face of LaVerne.

Walt's car had spun around after being hit, and had rolled over and along the highway. It had left a trail of shattered glass, metal, and dark, motionless shapes that had been broken open like paper bags before they rolled to a stop. These were . . . had been . . . Walt's laughing passengers. Pinned inside his wrecked car, beyond knowing that battery acid ran in his eyes, lay Walt Thomas. Somehow the lower half of his body had been twisted completely around, and hung by a shred of skin.

Ted O'Day, flashlight in hand, ran back to Bud's car. Ted was smeared with dirt and blood, his hands were torn, his eyes filled with horror. "Bud! Quick! Get Doc Hollis as fast as you can. Chuck's still alive!"

Bud stood by his car rigid with shock, his eyes staring. O'Day repeated his words, shaking Bud to make him hear. Snapped from his appalling trance, Bud tried to

speaking. The effort brought forth no words, but turning and falling across the front fender of his car he was horribly sick. As though he only then realized what had happened, he punctuated his retching with hoarse animal-like screams.

Ted O'Day grabbed Bud by his shoulder and pulled him to his feet. "Snap out of it, Bud! Chuck needs help! Don't get hysterical now!" Holding him with one hand, Ted slapped him sharply in the face several times, hard enough to make Bud's head turn.

Bud came to his senses enough to stop his throat-tearing yells and subside into a choked, terrified, yet normal weeping.

"Get the doctor," Ted repeated. "Maybe we can save Chuck. Please, Bud."

Bud looked at the road and the wrecked car. He shuddered, and lost ground. "I can't," he moaned. "They're in the road. I saw them. I saw them."

Ted shook him roughly. "I moved the bodies," Ted gritted. "Go on, Bud! And listen. Come back in my patrol car. I'll need it. Now go, boy. For God's sake, go!"

Bud got in his car, moving like someone in a dream. He started slowly, moving past the wrecked cars, and seeing what was in them. Ted had cleared the road, but there were awful puddles and streaks he had to drive over. He winced as his wheels went over those stains, and again he cried out with the horror of it.

The doctor paused only to put in a call for an ambulance, then drove to the scene of the double wreck. Bud, remembering what he had been told, stopped at Jake's and picked up the patrol car. Shaking with fear, he drove back to the accident, trying not to look, or to think.

Doc Hollis examined Chuck by the light of his car's headlights. "The boy has a chance, Officer. If the am-

balance gets here and back to the hospital in time, that is. He needs blood and he needs it fast. And that's not all."

O'Day looked up. "Can he ride in my car? In the back?"

The doctor nodded. "But every minute is precious. I don't know. . . . It's a long way to the hospital in Trenton. If this boy isn't there within an hour, he's done for."

"He'll be there in half an hour," O'Day said grimly. "Let's put him in my car. Then you go back to your office and call the police in every town between here and Trenton. Tell them we're coming through."

Bud sat helpless and staring in the patrol car as Chuck was put in the back seat. O'Day came around and gripped Bud by the arm. "Look, Bud. Chuck's life depends on how fast we get him to the hospital in Trenton. I'm going to be in back with him, and I want you to make this the fastest run in your life."

Bud shook his head slowly, stupidly. "I . . . can't . . . drive fast. I can't. . . ."

"You will!" O'Day's face was terrible as he dug his fingers in Bud's shoulders. "You will! You'll start this car and get us there, do you hear? Chuck's life . . . !"

Chuck groaned softly from the back seat, and that sound seemed to bring Bud out of his dream-like lethargy. "Chuck's . . . life. . . ." Bud said tightly. "Trenton. . . . I can do it. I can do it. I'll get my car. It's faster than. . . ."

"Take this one," O'Day snapped, getting in back with Chuck. "I'll show you how you can make a faster trip with this car even if yours will run away from it. See that button? Hit that and your red light and siren go on. You'll have a clear track with that, Bud. Nothing can beat it. Get going!"

Bud got going. He slid the car forward easily, so Chuck wouldn't be jounced. And with every turn of the wheel

he forgot a little more of the terrific wreck behind him, and thought more of the race he had to run for Chuck's life. He hit the button when he was in high, and the thin, rising wail of the siren came to his ears.

The patrol car could do between ninety and a hundred. Bud's car was faster than that. He wished for his own car as he pulled the last ounce from Ted's. With his own, he'd be way ahead.

Bud eased up as they approached the main highway, thinking of the stop sign ahead. Ted spoke from the back seat. "Go on through, Bud. That siren's working for you."

Bud went through, and even in that moment he felt a peculiar thrill as he noticed cars that had pulled out of the way to let him pass. Ted was right. That siren and red light really worked.

Out on the main road, Bud called back to mind every little bit of information he had picked up on all his other runs. They were all important now—just how fast he could take each turn, where intersections and hills might hold him up, even the bumps and rough spots. He remembered everything, and he raced.

Traffic melted before him. Cars and trucks that would have held him up had he been in his own car, now pulled out of the way to let him by. No matter what the obstruction, it seemed to give way before the scream of his siren and the flashing of his light. He hooked into turns he had studied for weeks, roared along flats, and fought his car's tendency to float and get out of hand.

As Bud drove he relied more and more on his siren and light to take care of trouble. Never before had he driven with such a sense of security, of righteousness. Never before had speed seemed so satisfactory. It was right. It was right.

"How's Chuck?" Bud called the question without looking back.

"Can't tell. Keep moving."

"Won't go any faster."

"Try."

"Trying."

The siren screamed and wailed and everything got out of his way. He flashed through a small town, fleetingly aware of a policeman blocking side traffic at one intersection, so he could get through.

Out in the dark country again, driving over a road he knew by heart. Ahead, to his right, he saw the lights of a car coming toward the highway. His siren and light would keep that boy back. Everything gave before those two.

Suddenly the ear-splitting wail of the siren trailed off, and was gone.

"Turn it back on," Ted ordered.

"I didn't turn it off." Bud gripped the wheel anxiously. Without the siren to help, what would he do to clear the road? He reached over and worked the button, but nothing happened.

Those lights coming from a side road moved to intercept him. The other car was moving fast, and he watched it with troubled eyes. Trying to judge where they would meet, Bud decided that he'd beat the other car. The other driver had to make a full stop before he hit the highway, and that would give Bud the margin he needed.

But the other driver didn't slow down, and Bud knew what was in store. The other driver was going to run the sign in an effort to get ahead of him.

"No!" Bud shouted. "No! No!"

But it was yes. The car came out of the side road, careened on the highway in front of Bud, and worked to pick up speed. To keep from hitting the other car Bud had to pump his brakes, burning rubber. And every slower mile meant that much less chance for Chuck.

"Take that guy," Ted said tightly from the back seat. "Take him."

Bud stabbed the gas pedal and went after the car in front. As he closed in he saw it was an old car that some country boy had decorated. He saw chrome exhausts, fancy fender skirts and flying squirrel tails. All the useless, gaudy trimmings.

Bud leaned on his horn, but the driver in front wouldn't give way. As Bud came out to the left to pass, the boy in the car ahead blocked the road, and raced down the very middle. Bud could do nothing but slow down and hang on, trying to find a place to pass. He kept his hand on the horn, trying to get them to understand.

A couple of laughing young faces showed at the rear window of the car ahead. They mocked and shouted at Bud and his horn, not seeing that he drove a police car. They stuck out their tongues and thumbed their noses, and wouldn't let him pass.

Bud almost exploded with rage. "I'll see that they rot in jail," he panted. "I'll hunt them down. I'll kill them. Don't they know what they're doing? Don't they know? There ought to be a law against them. I'll see to it that driver never gets on the road again. That stupid, lousy. . . . I'll take him!"

Bud kept muttering to himself as he narrowed the gap between the car in front and himself. He knew just how fast they could go, and how much kick his police car had. His opportunity came when the car in front had to give way for an oncoming car. In a flash of speed, before the driver in front could act, Bud shot alongside him. The other driver moved to the left, to run him off the road, but Bud wouldn't run. He held his place, matching wheel for wheel, until the two cars almost touched. At that moment, as mysteriously as it had gone



off, the siren came back on. The other driver, a boy about Bud's age, cast a frightened look at him, realized it was a police car Bud drove, and slammed on his brakes. Bud shot by and on into the night, siren screaming and light flashing. The driver he passed dropped back in confusion.

"Twenty-four, seventy-six, eighty-eight," Bud said aloud. "Twenty-four, seventy-six, eighty-eight."

"What?"

"His license number," Bud said grimly. "I'm going to look that boy up. I'm going to tell him what he did when he got in our way. I don't know what the law will do, but I aim to whip him until he's next door to dead."

"He might deserve another chance," Ted said. "He might have had a reason. . . ."

"For running that stop sign and hogging the road? What reason? No reason I know of that will save his neck."

"Maybe he's trying a speed run to Trenton," Ted said. "I suppose there were plenty who wanted your scalp the day you made your run."

"I didn't . . . I wasn't. . . ." Bud began hotly. But he stopped, because he knew he had, and he had been. "How's Chuck?" he asked.

"Still with us. But not very much."

It seemed to take hours and hours and hours. "If I only had my rod!" Bud burst out once as he wanted more speed and couldn't get it. "We'd be so far ahead. . . ."

"Maybe."

Bud didn't argue. He drove. He flashed through Holcomb with his foot all the way down, and there were the Holcomb cops again. This time they didn't shoot at him. They had cleared the road for him, and waved as he went by.

"They waved at me," Bud said to Ted. "The Holcomb cops. And look at these streets. Wide open. Maybe they're pretty good guys at that."

"Maybe." Ted's chuckle could be heard in the darkness, and Bud smiled.

At last, his hands cramped, his eyes tired, his body aching, his ears deafened from the sound of the siren, Bud was in Trenton, flying over the streets, turning in at the hospital, where everything was waiting.

When Chuck had been carried away Bud sat down on the ground and put his trembling hands over his face. The run was over.

Ted O'Day sat down beside Bud. "Twenty-seven minutes," he said quietly.

"What?"

"You made it in twenty-seven minutes. See what I meant when I said my car was faster than yours?"

"Yeah," Bud said. "I see. But . . . why didn't you drive? Why me?"

"Maybe because I couldn't have made it that fast," Ted answered.

"You could have. Any good driver could have—with that siren on his side."

"Maybe," Ted said, "I asked you to drive because I was trying to save two boys."

"Two?"

"Chuck and you."

"I don't understand."

"You thought you'd lost your touch behind the wheel," O'Day said. "You just proved you haven't. You proved to me you can't be licked behind the wheel, Bud."

"But I was."

"Not behind the wheel, Bud. Under the hat. Remember?"

Bud reached up and touched his pinned-up fedora.

"Yeah."

"Even if Chuck lives," O'Day went on, "he won't be able to compete in the State Roadeo. As the alternate, you'll go. This run showed you that you can believe in your ability to handle a car. Bud, be a sport. Give us a chance to put victory under your hat, too."

Bud breathed deeply. "All right. That guy who held us up tonight showed me something. Maybe he showed me what I am. I don't care what anybody says, I'll let you and Mr. Cole teach me. They can make all the fun they. . . ." Bud stumbled to a halt. He'd forgotten, and now, suddenly, he remembered. "I . . . I . . . guess there's nobody left to make fun any more," he said in a tight little voice. And for the first time he mourned as he cried.

## Chapter 12

AVONDALE buried its dead and their dreams.

Ralph Osler was buried with his dream of a college career in sports. LaVerne Shuler was buried with her dream of escape to Hollywood. Walt Thomas was buried with his dream of getting away from the farm. Marge Anderson was buried with her dream of being popular. And the others were buried with their dreams. There was no buying Ralph out of this scrape, no smiling her way out for LaVerne, no blustering his way out for Walt.

The victims of a careless moment were laid to rest. The entire town was at the cemetery to see half its teen-agers lowered in their coffins.

Bud was there with Mr. Cole and Ted O'Day. He watched the mourners, the weeping relatives and friends, the masses of flowers. He looked at the eight coffins and the eight graves, and he tried not to think of who was in each gray box.

His friends were buried, one by one, and they were laid to rest in a way that reflected their lives. Ralph's final moments were the most expensive, LaVerne's the most ornate. Walt's country family had a plot that was apart from the others.

In the hushed confusion of the mass burial it seemed to Bud that Marge's coffin got lost in the shuffle. The strange thought came to him that the others were being buried on purpose, and that Marge, who would do anything to be taken along with the crowd, was just following along to be one of them.

When it was over Bud walked away alone. He went back to the garage. He was so full of suppressed emotions he felt he would burst if he couldn't talk them out. And,

as he had always done in the past, he turned to his car. He could always talk to his car.

For a long time he sat and stared at the crude-looking hot rod he had built, and that had been a part of him. It was quiet in the garage. Bud found himself holding his breath and listening. Was it possible that he would never again hear Walt's wheels dragging on the gravel outside, or Ralph's cheerful hail, or see LaVerne walk into the garage with a grimace of distaste at its barrenness? They couldn't be gone. They *couldn't* be.

But they were. He had seen them.

He wanted to tell his little car what it was like. He wanted to speak his suffering and pain, but for once the words didn't come. For the first time his stubby hop-up seemed cold and unsympathetic, and strange.

Bud remembered the first day he had started to build his car. The day he had salvaged the body and made his plans for the fastest car in the county. How, bit by bit, he had added a piece here and a piece there, spent his money on power and gleaming chrome, and built from odds and ends the vehicle that stood for speed.

How the others had envied him. How they had tried, without success, to copy him. They had added chrome, and tried for speed, and worn black leather jackets and boots with chains. They had tried to identify themselves with the roaring power and speed he had shown them, and they had died upholding the tradition that the answer to every problem is found above seventy miles an hour.

"You did it," Bud said hollowly, looking at his car. "You and me. We did it. We did it."

In a sudden fit of rage Bud picked up a hammer and advanced to his car to smash it to bits. But he stopped with his hammer in the air. There had been enough smashed and twisted metal, enough violence.

Bud wheeled and ran to the wall where his coveralls hung. He put them on with shaking hands, gathered up an armful of tools and returned to his squat hot rod. For a minute he looked at it, as though trying to fix in his mind forever the line of its fenders, its cut-down top, its dull red finish and its mirrored chrome. Then he went to work. And piece by piece, as he had once put it together, he took his car apart. Took it apart until it was turned to a jumble of scattered parts, and his baby, his buddy, his hot rod, was destroyed and forever dead.

Bud Crayne brought his car to a stop and let his hands fall helplessly to his sides. "I can't do it, Mr. Cole. I can't."

Guy Cole, who was seated beside Bud in the training car, said only what he had said a hundred times before. "Try again, Bud. It takes practice."

"No. It's hopeless. I try to remember how I should drive, but when I get under way, my brain is too slow. My hands and feet don't wait for me. They do what they've always done, and I've made a mistake before I realize it."

Mr. Cole nodded. "Yes. That's why it's harder to teach you how to drive correctly than it was to teach Chuck. You have all your bad habits to unlearn. All he had to do was learn."

"I'll never make it," Bud said sadly. "If I couldn't win the county Roadeo, what will I do in the state meet, when the best drivers from all over the state compete?"

"Do you want that engineering scholarship?" Mr. Cole asked.

"I'd do anything. . . ."

"Then drive. Drive."

"Okay." Bud put the car in gear and drove back on the road.

"You forgot to signal with your hand when you un-parked," Mr. Cole said.

Bud made a face and hit the wheel with his fist. "See what I mean?" he cried in a tortured voice. "I can't do it. My hands and feet are ahead of me."

"We'll try again," Mr. Cole said. "We'll drill you night and day from now until the Roadeo. It won't be easy to lick your bad habits, but we will."

"Okay." Bud's mouth was grim as he deliberately signalled for a stop and pulled off the road. "How was that?"

"Your signal was all right, but your handling of the car was poor. Let's try again."

"It's useless. I'll never do it."

"Tell you what, Bud. You need a chance to relax. Just drive to Trenton, and we'll see Chuck. Forget we're in training."

"Fine." Bud was relieved. "I wish Chuck could be up and around in time to compete. He really won the right to be in the state Roadeo. It was partly my fault he was in that wreck. I helped needle him into going."

"That's all over, Bud. The future is what's important. And your winning the Roadeo."

Bud headed the car out of town. Another car passed him on the way in, the driver looking at Bud with some curiosity. "What's he staring at?" Bud grunted.

"Lundgren? He's surprised to see you with me. You know, Bud, the school board is going to reconsider driver training. Your coming in like this has made a big impression, and if you win the state meet after losing the county, we'll have a driver training program in Avondale High next year."

"Mr. Cole," Bud said seriously as he drove along the highway at forty-five, "do you really think driver training will eliminate accidents like the one. . . ."

"It will help more than any other single factor I know," Mr. Cole said. "But if we're going to lick *teenicide* right, we need help from all sides. Training in safe driving so

that safe driving becomes a habit is, I think, the most important thing. The other remedies will have to help keep the trained driver on the safety side."

"Like what?"

"Young people need a chance to have fun and blow off steam in some other way than in cars. School sports help, recreation centers help, and so on. They have to want to live, and that means we adults have to help make life worth living. That means more chances for an education, and a chance to pick the right job, and find a future. And with some, Bud, it's a question of glands. Some youngsters need more action and excitement than others. That's the way they're built. We have to find outlets for that energy. We just can't tell them to sit still and be good."

"It won't be an easy job," Bud said. "There are some people you can't talk to. I hope I can do what you're doing, Mr. Cole. I wish I could talk safety to every kid in the country. If they only could see that wreck the way I saw it. . . ."

"It's easy to forget wrecks," Mr. Cole said. "The hardest thing to forget is doing something the way you've been trained. If we can get them in the schools when they're young enough, and train them from the beginning, the teen-agers would have the best driving records of any and all age groups."

"I believe you, Coach," Bud said, smiling. "But how are you going to crack the tough nuts like myself? Guys who come to you loaded with bad habits?"

"There's a way to get around that too," Mr. Cole said. "I haven't found it yet, but I will."

"And I'll help." Bud put out his hand to signal a stop as he came to the intersection with the main highway. "How was that? I'm getting beter."

"Good. With enough practice, you'll be hard to beat, Bud."



Chuck was glad to see them. He was still in a cast, but he was cheerful. His first question was to ask how Bud was making out. Bud grimaced. "I'm terrible."

"He's improving," Mr. Cole said. The little teacher had a glint in his eye. "We'll make a winner out of him yet."

"I've been worrying about him," Chuck admitted.

Bud sat down beside Chuck's bed. "You . . . worrying about me? When you don't even know whether you'll ever. . . ."

"I'll walk again, Bud," Chuck said. "I've made my mind up about that. But I've worried about you because I know how much winning would mean to you. Shucks, I've been offered an athletic scholarship, and my family will help me through school. But you don't have anyone, Bud. Winning the Roadeo is your only chance to put your talent to work. It made me feel bad when I won the Roadeo. But now that you're going, I want you to show them all. I'll be praying for you, Bud."

Later, when Bud was driving home again, he turned to Guy Cole. "Did you ever see anyone like Chuck? He's in there with a broken back, and he worries about me."

"He's quite a boy," Cole answered. "He's been like that ever since I've known him. Always thinking of the other fellow. It's a wonderful attitude. He's one of the few I've met who is always thoughtful and courteous. Maybe that's why he found it easy to learn driving. I don't know."

A wide grin spread over Bud's face. "There's a way to find out. I'll let you know."

"Let me know what?"

Bud grinned more than ever, but shook his head. "I'll tell you when the time comes—if it comes."

The morning of the State Roadeo both Guy Cole and

Ted O'Day called for Bud. When he came out of the house and saw them, he burst out laughing. "What are you two looking so worried about?" Bud needed. "I'm the one who's in the contest."

Cole and O'Day looked at each other, and then at Bud. They'd never seen him so cheerful. On this, of all mornings, they expected him to be tense.

"Confidence is a fine thing, Bud," Mr. Cole said as they drove away. "But don't forget you have a tough grind ahead."

"I'll win," Bud said airily. "Don't worry."

"Look, Bud," the red-headed patrolman added, "don't be too sure of yourself. The last I heard you had some shaky spots to your driving."

"Me?" Bud said in mock surprise. "Me? What shaky spots?"

Mr. Cole looked worried. "Bud, you know what shaky spots. Please, Bud, if you want to win, you'll have to be more serious about. . . ."

"I am serious," Bud insisted. "If you don't believe me . . . Look, drive over to the practice field by the high school. We have time. I'll show you how serious I am."

Mr. Cole drove to the high school. It wouldn't hurt to put Bud through his paces and take him down a peg.

"All right, Bud," Cole said as he and O'Day got out. "Show us what you can do."

Bud slid behind the wheel. "Here goes, men."

Cole and O'Day stood back while Bud ran through the series of practice maneuvers Cole had worked out. The two men stared anxiously at first, then their eyes gained a look of confidence that matched Bud's.

"He did it," Cole said. "I don't know how, but he did it. He's as smooth as ever, and he's licked all those thoughtless and careless habits. That means. . . ."

"He'll win," Ted said quietly. "He'll win, and we'll

win, and he's been won, and . . . Oh, I don't know. I feel so good I could fall down."

When Bud was through demonstrating his ability, Cole wanted to know how he'd done it, but Bud wouldn't answer. "Nope," Bud said. "I won't tell until after the Roadeo. If it wins for me, I'll tell you."

"All right," the little teacher sighed. "But I believe you, Bud. Whatever it is, it will win for you if you don't lose it. Now let's get going. You've got a scholarship to win."

The State Roadeo was like the county contest. A little harder in spots, and with better drivers competing, but essentially the same. Mr. Cole and O'Day watched Bud move through the tests. Sure enough, his old command of the wheel was back again, and even here he stood out with his smoothness and wonderful eye for the crucial inch. But something had been added. At first the two men were afraid Bud would forget his signals, gun his motor, or lose points through impatience. But as he went through test after test without losing a point, they relaxed. He was coming through as he said he would.

"His lips are moving," O'Day said, shading his eyes. "Do you think he's praying?"

"I am if he isn't," Cole said in a strained voice. "Do you think our boy will make it, Ted?"

"He's making it," Ted said proudly. "We didn't go wrong on him when we got him another chance, Guy. He's making it, and he's making a new man of himself."

Hours later it was all over. Bud drove home with Ted and Guy in the front seat with him. He watched the road ahead, driving effortlessly. But he was tired. It had been a strain, and he ached all over.

"Well, Bud," Guy Cole said. "Now that you won, how

about telling us the secret. Was it prayer? We saw your lips moving."

Bud laughed, a hearty, ringing laugh. "I'm almost ashamed to tell you."

"Go on," Ted urged. "What was your secret?"

"Remember," Bud said to Mr. Cole, "the day we left the hospital after seeing Chuck? We said what a nice, courteous, thoughtful fellow he'd always been?"

"Yes."

"Well, I thought what a shame it was he'd missed his chance in the Roadeo, and then I decided that he would drive in it after all. Even though my hands were on the wheel, I decided that I would drive with Chuck's brain."

O'Day looked worried. "Bud, do you feel all right, boy?"

"Wonderful." The words wanted to spill out of Bud's mouth so fast he could hardly talk coherently. "It's true, Ted. Right then and there I made believe Chuck was driving, and that whatever happened, I would see through Chuck's eyes, and not mine."

Mr. Cole began to smile.

"I hadn't driven a mile," Bud went on, "before I realized that I'd found my weak spot in driving. As long as I was Chuck, everything was fine. I tried to . . . well, to filter every experience through the courtesy and thoughtfulness that Chuck has. And it worked. The moment I started giving the other fellow a chance, and reaching for the brake instead of the horn, I knew I'd found the answer.

"That's how I won the Roadeo. As I drove through the tests, I kept telling myself that I was Chuck, and that Chuck was the one behind the wheel. And I played hard enough so that it *was* Chuck. When I did it that way, I automatically did the courteous and thoughtful thing,

and that was the right thing. It's easy. That's all there is to good driving."

"Easy?" Guy Cole shook his head. "It's easy when you find out. It isn't so easy to teach, or to learn."

"I used to tell the kids to do what I would do when driving," Bud said soberly. "They tried, and some of them were killed. I'll never get that off my conscience. But maybe I can make up for it. Maybe, from now on, I can convince kids to drive like I do. And when I say drive like Bud, I mean the way Bud drives like Chuck."

Bud sighed, thinking of the future that was now open to him. "I owe you two a real vote of thanks," he said quietly at last. "You saved my hide and helped me win, but it's more than that. You were the first people I'd ever known who took any interest in me as a person. You've been like a . . . a family for me."

The three men rode on in silence. Suddenly Bud stopped thinking about his wonderful future to ask, "Now that I'm taken care of, and my future is set, what are you two going to do? I mean about kids and driving."

Cole and O'Day both smiled, and it was Cole who answered. "Our work's cut out for us, Bud. As soon as you're on your way, Ted and I will take a deep breath, give thanks, start looking for another Bud Crayne, and go through the whole thing again."

## HERE ARE THE ANSWERS

- (1) *False.* The average driver takes  $\frac{5}{8}$  of a second to react to danger and in this time his car will cover 18 feet at 20 m.p.h. and 27 feet at 30 m.p.h., 36 feet at 40 m.p.h., 45 feet at 50 m.p.h. and 55 feet at 60 m.p.h.
- (2) *False.* Braking distances are as follows: 20 m.p.h., 19 feet; 30 m.p.h., 43 feet; 40 m.p.h., 76 feet; 50 m.p.h., 119 feet; and 60 m.p.h., 171 feet. Remember reaction distance must be added to braking distance to get total stopping distance.
- (3) *False.* Every 10 m.p.h. which you add to your speed cuts 20 feet off the distance at which you can recognize danger.
- (4) *False.* Tests show that you can see an unexpected object only half as far as an expected one.
- (5) *False.* This glare will cut your perception distance from 75 to 80 per cent. Always dim your lights, and slow down when the other fellow won't dim his.
- (6) *False.* You will need a minimum of 900 feet.
- (7) *True.* By actual test, the braking distance for a car going 20 m.p.h. on glare ice is 169 feet without chains, and 88 feet with full chains.
- (8) *False.* Leave the brake alone and keep your foot on the accelerator since a little power in the driving wheels will help to counteract the side-swing. But, better still, slow down *before* you get yourself into this dangerous predicament.
- (9) *True.* Also if you are sliding into danger, you can brake *very gently*. Never apply the brakes hard in a skid.
- (10) *False.* You risk a blow-out and actually require a longer distance to stop by locking your wheels. In order to stop in the shortest possible distance, either alternately step on and release the brake pedal, or apply the maximum steady pressure possible *without locking the wheels*.

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