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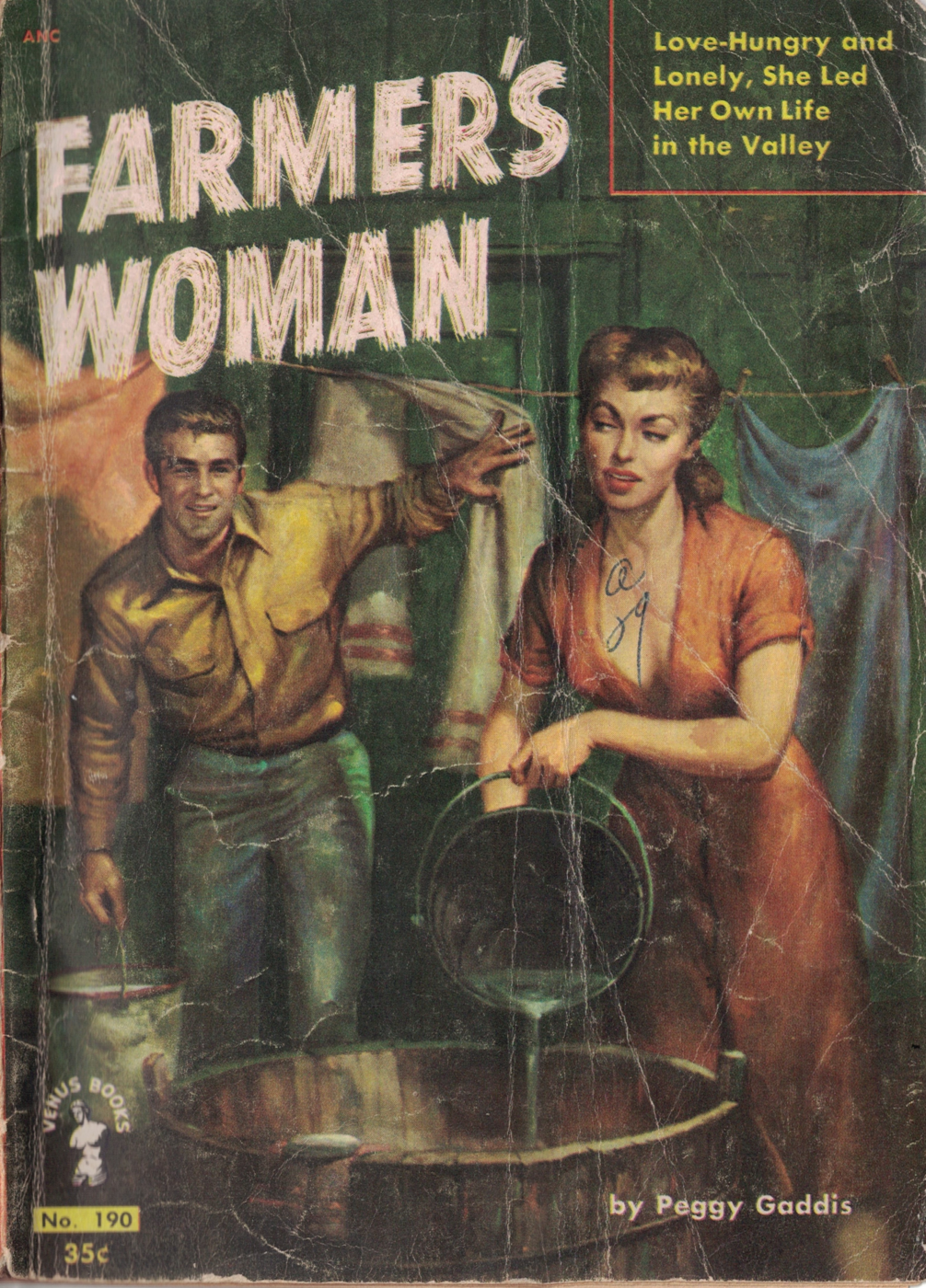
FARMER'S WOMAN

Love-Hungry and Lonely, She Led Her Own Life in the Valley



by Peggy Gaddis

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"One of these days, Nora," he said softly, "you're going to wake up to the fact that you're a woman, and that you love a man." That was Grady Kilburn, talking to the FARMER'S WOMAN about love.

"You're not a child, Nora. You're a woman, and I'm a man. And between a man and a woman there is always a possibility of exchange." That was Jim Dexter, talking to the FARMER'S WOMAN about love.

"I loved him, Nora. He said he loved me. He was going to marry me and we were going away from here." That was Liza-Jane, talking to the FARMER'S WOMAN about love.

"Men's men and women's women and I reckon the Good Lord knowed what he was about when he made them like that. Men was made for women and women was made for men, and I reckon that's how it ought to be." That was Granny, talking to the FARMER'S WOMAN about love.

They all tried to teach the FARMER'S WOMAN, who knew more about love than any of them!

FARMER'S WOMAN

by *Peggy Gaddis*

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THE MID-MORNING SUN FELT HOT, as Nora moved steadily down the rows of young, healthy cotton stalks, carefully chopping out the weeds, her tall, strong body bending rhythmically to the task, feeling the sweat between her shoulder blades, her face beneath the ugly old sunbonnet moist and stinging.

She was unaware of the approach of the two men until they were within speaking distance of her, and then she straightened, head up like a startled animal that sniffs the approach of danger. Her red-brown eyes were cold as she glanced at them contemptuously.

The two men, one tall and gangling, the other shorter and chubby-looking, in their grimy overalls, took off their hats with awkward gestures and stood eyeing her uncertainly.

"Reckon we got bad news for ye, Nora," said the tall one.

"When'd you ever bring me anything else?" Nora demanded. "It's Paw, of course. What's it for this time? And how much is his fine?"

"Your Paw ain't in jail, Nora," said the tall man, his voice pitched low, sorrowful. "It's a heap worse than that."

"He's dead, Nora," said the chubby one sadly.

"Now, Lem, we was planning to break it gentle-like," the other one protested.

Nora flung back her head, and the old sunbonnet slid back, revealing a glorious mass of ruddy red-brown hair, twisted into a tight knot at the back of her head. She looked sharply from one man to the other, and her breath came in a surge that lifted her magnificent bosom until it strained against the thin, ragged, old blue cotton shirt she wore.

"Paw's—dead?" she whispered, unable to believe it.

"He sure is, Nora, and we're right sorry to have to bring you such news," said the tall man sadly.

"You're sure? Certain—sure?"

"He's down to the undertaker's right now," said Lem. "He got into a scrape down at the still, and he fell and got killed. Hit his head on a rock."

Once more, Nora breathed deeply, and then she whipped off the disfiguring old sunbonnet and lifted her face, sweat-stained and grimy, but still startlingly beautiful, to the blue, cloudless sky.

"I'm thanking you, God," she said simply. "I'm thanking you for me and the kids."

The two men drew back a step and glanced at each other, startled, then at Nora.

"Now, Nora, that ain't no way for you to talk," Lem protested, scandalized. "He was your Paw."

"That wasn't none of my fault," Nora reminded them. "I hated his guts, and I'm so glad he's dead I could climb up that there oak tree and yell my fool head off."

"It ain't right to say evil about the dead," protested the tall man.

Nora's eyes blazed with scarcely controlled fury. "It was right, I reckon, for him to beat my Maw every time he got a hideful of that rot-gut you two fellers make," she spat at them. "It was right for him to give Maw a whipping two months before Julie was born, so Julie would be born too soon and damned near die, and ain't never been strong since.

"Maw died because Paw was liquored up and took a notion to kick her around. That was the night I'd have killed him myself, only I knew there had to be somebody to look after the young 'uns. No, you ain't brought me bad news. You brought me the best news I've had since I can recollect. This is just about the happiest day of my life."

While the men stared at her, aghast, she threw down her hoe and turned, moving her tall, strong body with an effortless, untaught grace across the field to where a quilt had been spread beneath a wide-branched white-oak tree. A baby, two years old, played with a few battered, makeshift toys on the quilt, and when Nora knelt, the little girl lifted a small, pale face, lit suddenly with a happy smile.

Nora scooped the child into her arms and held her close, as she crooned tenderly over her. "He's dead, honey," she murmured in the child's ear. "He's dead, and we don't ever have to be scared no more when he comes staggering and cussing up to the house, whipping the first young 'un his hands can catch. He's dead, honey, and we don't none of us ever have to worry about him no more. Not ever no more!"

The two men murmured uneasily together for a moment and then followed her across the field to the house. They stood looking at her as she cradled the child in her arms.

"'Bout the funeral, Nora, you want me and Jake should make the arrangements?" asked Lem. "Where you want he should be buried?"

"Any place, except there beside Maw. She'd never rest easy in her

grave, knowing he was there," Nora said. "He wasn't fit to be buried in the earth, nohow. It would purely poison the ground."

Lem and his friend were appalled. "Now, Nora, that ain't no way to put him away with, but Bud Marshall said tell you he'd give you all the time you needed to pay for things."

Nora's eyes, bitter, contemptuous, surveyed the two men. "Seeing how you two have had all the cash money him or the farm's been able to make these last two years, seems like you two ought to be the ones to pay for his funeral," she snapped.

"You ain't got no call to be talking to us that way," Lem protested.

"Oh, get out! Do whatever you want. It makes no matter to me whether he's burried or not," snapped Nora, and stood up, the child in her arms. "Whatever it'll cost, though, it'll be worth it to know we don't ever have to be wearied with him no more."

She moved away from them towards the old, dilapidated house where she had been born, and where she had spent her nineteen years of life. She had never been farther than the county seat, eighteen miles away, and she felt no desire to go. She had a love for the land, for the old house, that was in her blood. It would have been as easy to transplant the giant live-oak beneath which the baby had played, as to have transplanted Nora Anderson from the hilly, rocky farm that she loved so deeply.

As Nora anticipated, Lem and Jake broadcast far and wide Nora's "unnatural" attitude towards her father's death, but in common justice, the neighborhood admitted that Rufus Anderson had not been "such-of-a-much as a father." Still, he was her father, and she might have pretended some slight grief at his passing.

Nora stood stony-eyed beside the grave the next afternoon, and almost before the first clods of red mountain earth had plummeted down on her father's coffin, she turned briskly away, herding the seven children ahead of her towards the old rattle-trap pick-up truck in which they had driven to the cemetery. Instead of turning towards home, however, she drove to the county seat, Once there, she regarded the children sternly.

"I'm askin' everyone of you to set tight, right where you are till I finish with Banker Burns," she told them. "If every last one of you is right here when I get back, you know what you're going to get?"

Bright-eyed as small animals, the children, scrubbed and slicked in their poor best, regarded her, eagerly expectant.

"I'm gonna buy every last one of you an ice-cream cone," she promised and grinned as the children whooped with delight. "We got some celebrating to do, so you just sit tight and wait. You hear?"

There was an eager chorus of assent. Nora then walked into the bank.

"Well, well, Nora," fat, bald-headed old Banker Burns greeted her unctuously. "This is a sad day for you, I know."

"Don't talk like a fool, Banker Burns," Nora said. "You ought to know this is just about the happiest day of my life, and don't bother looking nasty-eyed at me. Everybody for miles around knows Paw was a no-good, no-'count, nothing-much, and his getting killed ain't breaking my heart a bit. You know that same's everybody else, so let's not waste time talking foolishment."

Banker Burns eyed her uneasily, but was silent.

"About that mortgage you got on the farm, banker," Nora went on. "That's what I want to talk to you about. What are you aiming to do about it, now Paw's dead?"

Banker Burns rubbed his plump hands together, as though he washed them in invisible soap and water. "We-e-ell, now, Nora, I reckon the bank can go along with you on that mortgage, as long as you can keep up the interest payments," he said cautiously. "You figure you can do that?"

Nora smiled thin-lipped, contemptuous. "We been doing it right along, even with Paw throwing away all the money he made and most of what the farm made," she pointed out. "Reckon without him hanging around, throwing our money away, I'll be able to keep up the interest and the taxes, and maybe if the cotton's good we might pay a little something on the principal. We'll make two bales this year, I figure. I got eight young pigs, and a bull calf for our year's meat and the garden for all our garden-sass. Reckon we can put near about the whole of the cotton money on the mortgage, come fall."

"Now, that's good, Nora, that's very good", said Banker Burns happily. "You're a fine farmer, Nora. One of the best in the county. Reckon some lucky young man will come along one of these days right soon and marry you—."

Nora's jaw set so hard that her beautiful face seemed to take on several years beyond her scant nineteen. "That's where you're mighty wrong, banker," she told him through clenched teeth. "The man I'd marry ain't been born yet and never will be. The way I look at it, the only thing wrong with this world is there's men in it—and men I

purely hate and despise. I wouldn't wipe my foot on the best one that ever lived. The best one that ever lived ain't worth killing!"

Banker Burns squirmed beneath the stinging lash of her contempt for his whole sex. In this mountain country, men still maintained they were superior in every way to women, who were to them mere chattel, like a horse, or mule or cow.

"Now, that's not right for you to feel like that, Nora," he protested. "All men aren't like your father."

"Maybe not," Nora drawled, "but a hell of a lot of 'em are. All I've ever seen anyway, and I've seen more than I ever care about seeing. I'll run the farm and raise the kids. I hate it that three of them are boys, and they'll grow into men, but maybe I can teach them a few decent things before they do."

She stood up, brushed the skirt of her crisply-laundered, faded gingham dress and nodded. "I'm obliged to you about the mortgage, Banker Burns," she told him. "I'll keep it paid up, and one of these days I'll get it paid plum out!"

She walked out of the bank with that long-limbed, unconscious grace that made the banker's eyes gleam. She was a handsome girl with a superb figure. Some man would have a time taming her, but it would be a rewarding job. Then he jerked his thoughts back from that direction, scandalized that a man of his standing in the community, a deacon in the church, could let his thoughts stray in such directions.

FOR A WHILE the whole community watched Nora uneasily, not quite able to forgive her for her sinful talk after her father's death. As the months sped by and the old farm took on a touch of prosperity, and the children looked well-fed and decently clothed, no longer like small, frightened animals, they decided that she should be forgiven. Not, they had to admit, that she ever showed any signs of wanting to be forgiven, or of caring whether they forgave her or not.

Every Sunday morning the Andersons' rundown old truck arrived at Harmony Grove Baptist Church, and the children, scrubbed and neat, were herded into Sunday School while Nora took her place with the women-folk, and all the family stayed for preaching. Gradually, they forgot there had ever been a time when there had been a grown man at the Anderson farm.

People remarked that Liza-Jane, approaching her sixteenth birthday, was getting prettier every day, and that Nora was going to find the girl a handful one of these days because she was already "noticing" the boys. Johnny, Liza-Jane's twin, was a big, overgrown lout of a boy much like his father in appearance and not, they admitted frankly, "overly bright." Pete was thirteen, and "took after his Maw's family, praises be," alert and intelligent, but lacking Johnny's brawn. Jennie-Sue at twelve, was plump, rather slow, but tenacious in her studies and made good grades. Bill was nine and absorbed in a world of his own, into which he scarcely allowed the intrusion of any, save a chosen few of his own cronies. Julie was, of course, the very apple of Nora's eye. She was approaching her sixth birthday though nobody had expected she would ever live to see it. She had been so weak and frail as a result of the unfavorable conditions surrounding her birth.

At the Ladies' Aid and other feminine gatherings, Nora and her brood were often discussed, with the consensus of opinion being that in the four years since her Paw's death Nora had done an outstanding job with the young 'uns and the farm. But always there was the final verdict summed up by one or the other women: "Seems too bad, Nora's being such a man-hatin' woman. Reckon maybe it's just as well, though. Ain't many men would be willing to take on that family of hers to raise. Mostly, fellows like to start their own families, not put in the first years of married life bringing up somebody else's kids."

To Nora, going her busy, contented way, none of it was of any importance. There was no time for anything but the immediate tasks and problems. As soon as one was solved, another one came her way. She had all she could do just to take each one as it came, without trying to look ahead.

On a bright, hot morning in September Nora was busy in the kitchen, canning vegetables for winter use. Julie was playing on the floor with Susie, the cat, and Susie's latest litter of kittens.

The sound of a car in the yard made Nora look up with sharp displeasure, but before she could do more than move her canning kettle to a spot on the old stove where it would not simmer so fast, there was the sound of a man's voice, making the traditional country greeting, before leaving his car.

"Hello there. Anybody home?"

She swung open the screen door and stepped out on the wide back porch, to see a well-kept coupe. From it, a man stepped out and came towards her, hat in hand. He was tall, brown, good-looking, and Nora had time only to be glad Liza-Jane was at school, for Liza-Jane had developed a distressing way of making a fool of herself when most anything wearing britches showed up.

"Are you Miss Anderson?" demanded the young man with an engaging grin. "I'm Grady Kilburn from over to the county seat."

"Howdy, Mr. Kilburn. What can I do for you?" Her tone was curt and unfriendly.

"I'm campaigning for Sheriff, Miss Anderson. I'd like to have your vote," said Grady, and his eyes swept her, startled to realize that she was really as beautiful, as magnificent looking as rumor had it.

"My vote?" she repeated. "I never voted in my life, Mr. Kilburn and I sure ain't planning to start now."

"That's too bad, Miss Anderson," said Grady quietly, and her color rose beneath the implied censure in his voice. "It's the duty, and the privilege of every American citizen to cast a vote and to help elect officials who have the country's best interests at heart."

Nora's smile was little better than a sneer. "You don't say!" she mocked him. "Looky here, Mr. Kilburn. Voting is men's business, and I always say if there's any blessed thing in this world a man can do without some fool-woman to help him, leave him do it."

Grady nodded. "I've heard that you're against men," he admitted, and grinned.

"I hate their guts!" said Nora.

"Some man must have done you a lot of dirt, Miss Anderson, but surely that's no reason for you to hate the whole sex, a beautiful woman like you," said Grady quietly.

"It's reason enough for me, and I ain't looking for no other. Now, if you'll excuse me, I got my work to do," she snapped.

With a friendly, disarming grin, Grady said quietly, "I'd like very much much to talk to you for a little. May I come in and talk while you do your work?"

Nora's sniff was disdainful, her thin smile contemptuous. "Seems like that's what most men are good for," she said. "Talking, while women work. But come on, if you must."

"Thanks," said Grady, unperturbed by her manner.

Julie looked up from her place in a corner, and Grady said gaily, "Hi, there! That's a mighty fine cat you've got there."

"Howdy," Julie's tone was eager, her smile radiant as she caressed the purring cat, the tiny scraps of kittens tumbling impartially over their mother and Julie. "She's a very smart cat, too."

Grady assumed the easy mountaineer position that they themselves called "hunkering down." Grinning down at her, he picked up a kitten and laughed as it made tiny spitting noises.

"I'll bet this one is a little girl," he told Julie. "You can always tell which are girls. They put up a fight even when they aren't bigger than your fist, and you could smash them with one finger. She reminds me of a kitten I found when I was overseas in the Army."

As Nora went busily and competently about her work, Grady launched into a story that held Julie's fascinated attention, until her great dark eyes, that seemed out of proportion in her thin, colorless face, grew even wider.

Nora glanced now and then at the two, but did not let her attention wander from her work, until at last she turned and spoke curtly. "Dinner's dished, Mr. Kilburn. You're welcome to set and eat, if you're of mind to."

The first hint of awkwardness touched Grady as he stood up, and glanced at the table. "Oh, I didn't intend to hang around this long, Miss Anderson. Nor make you ask me to dinner," he protested.

"Vittles is here, if they're good enough for you—and you're welcome," said Nora. "Man's got to eat, and you're here, so you might's well set."

"Sure I won't be inconveniencing you?" Grady's eyes were hungry on the ample, simple food.

"Reckon me and the kids ain't gonna miss what you eat," she assured him. "Such as it is, there's a gracious plenty."

"It looks great," said Grady and turned to Julie and bowed, offering his hand to help her to her feet. "May I assist you, madam?"

Julie gave a little delighted crow of laughter as she put her small brown hand in his and minced to her chair at the table. As she saw the child's face, touched with an unaccustomed gaiety, Nora glanced uncertainly at Grady, deeply grateful that he had been able to entertain the child. Still as his eyes met hers, her chin went up slightly and her eyes cooled.

As they settled to the meal, Grady studied her across the oil-cloth covered table, above his plate heaped with vegetables fresh from the garden, and a succulent slab of side-meat which any mountain man considered far superior to any other meat.

"Miss Anderson, what's your attitude towards moonshining?"

Nora's eyes flashed with fire, and her jaw hardened. "I'd like to see every last one of them stills blown higher than the top of Old Smokey," she said sharply. "I'd love to blast them myself."

"Good! Then at least you and I have that much in common," said Grady earnestly. "That's one of the reasons I want to be sheriff."

Nora stared at him, bitter amusement curling her lovely mouth. "You're aimin' to run the 'shiners out?" she demanded.

"If I'm elected sheriff, it's the very first thing I'm going to do," Grady assured her.

To his astonishment and anger, her head tipped back, and she laughed richly.

"Mr. Kilburn, where d'you come from?" she demanded.

"I was born and raised here in the Valley."

"Sure, I know. Your folks came into the Valley back before they found gold up north and drove the Indians out," she assured him. "I mean you ain't been around here the last two—three years, have you?"

"No, I was overseas in the Army."

Nora nodded her understanding. "That's how come you talk so foolish about drivin' the 'shiners out."

Grady studied her sharply. "You think it can't be done?"

"Mr. Kilburn, I know it can't—unless you want to drive out about ninety per cent of the men that live here. I don't reckon Doc Barlow, or Preacher's got them a still, but I bet they're about the only ones that ain't," she mocked him. "You mind me givin' you some advice, Mr. Kilburn?"

"I'd be very grateful, Miss Anderson. By the way—couldn't you call me Grady?"

"Don't see no reason as I should," she told him.

Grady gave her his engaging, disarming grin, "Oh, well, I can wait. I'm a persistent kind of a cuss," he assured her, and before she could bristle at that, he went on quickly, "You were going to give me some advice, remember?"

"It's that if you want to be elected sheriff, you keep your mouth shut about driving the moonshiners out," she told him. "You start shooting off about that, and you won't get enough votes to stick in a hollow tooth."

Grady frowned at her thoughtfuly. "You really think these people up here are that lawless?"

Nora lifted her shoulder in a shrug. "What's lawless about it, they claim? A fellow's got a right to grow him a corn-crop. If he grows him more than his family or his hogs and mule can eat, then ain't he got a right to make him some good corn liquor with what's left?" she asked. "Funny how many folks in these parts don't ever have any roasting ears or fresh-ground meal, and how many sacks of hog-feed Storekeeper down to the Corners brings in."

Grady's jaw set hard. "Nora, I've heard about your old man," he said. Then he added swiftly, "Mine was cut off the same chunk, so far as the whiskey was concerned. My mother went through some rough times when he was drinking. Sober, he was a harmless, inoffensive, right nice guy, but get his skin full of that white lightning they brew around here, and many's the time my mother and the children have been routed out of bed on a bitter cold night and chased out into the woods to avoid being clubbed and kicked."

Nora was studying him curiously. "There ain't nothing specially strange about that," she conceded. "I reckon there ain't many young 'uns around here ain't been through the same things. But I'm saying you ain't gonna be able to law these men into giving up their stills."

"I'm not so sure about that," said Grady. "Clap a few of them in jail, destroy a few of the stills, make things so tough and expensive for them so that they'll behave themselves."

Nora's laugh was as unexpected as Julie's had been. It was a laugh of amusement, but it was touched, too, by derision. "And did you stop to think what would be happening to you, while these men were being locked up and their stills destroyed?" she asked.

"Oh, I'm not expecting to make friends among the 'shiners."

"About the second after you tore down the first still, there would be a string of fellows, all wearing bed sheets so you couldn't know who they are knocking at your door. And you'd be lucky if they just took you out, tied you to a tree and larruped the daylights out of you."

"That's if I'm lucky? What if I'm not lucky?"

She made a gesture of dismissal. "Oh, they'd kill you dead," she said.

He studied her for a moment, frowning. "Are you serious, Nora?"

"You'd better believe I am!" There was warning, sharp and honest, in her voice.

"You mean there are still night riders here in the mountains?"

"Still? Always has been since the first settlers came and had to 'protect' themselves from the Indians," she assured him. "You were born and raised here. How come you're surprised there are night riders in these parts? Haven't there always been?"

"Oh, I suppose so," Grady admitted. "But good Lord, it's less than a hundred miles to Atlanta. It's only fifteen miles from the Corners to a paved road that connects with the Atlanta-Chicago highway, a four-lane road that's one of the heaviest travelled in the state."

"What's that got to do with 'shiners and night riders in the Valley?" she asked in simple astonishment.

"Oh, I don't know. I guess maybe I thought the Valley's isolation was too well broken down to have that kind of crime," he admitted.

"Mister, you been places and you got yourself a education so you can talk fancy. You've been a soldier, and soldiers learn a heap, I reckon. But you sure do talk childish. There's as much crime in the Valley as there is people. People makes crime. It don't make no difference how close you are to big cities. Wherever there are men, there's crime!"

Grady grinned in spite of himself. "And of course, women never sin," he drawled.

"If they do, it's because some skunk of a man pushed them," she snapped at him. "Sure, there are women in the Valley who maybe ain't no account, but it's always a man that started them off that way. If there were no men, there would be no bastard young 'uns, would there?"

"And none of the other kind, either," Grady reminded her, and put out his hand and touseled Julie's long, thick black curls.

Nora's face softened as she looked at the child. "Well, I reckon you're right about that," she admitted. "Still and all, it's the men

folks that make all the trouble. And before you start yapping around that you aim to clean out the 'shiners, you better take yourself some time to think. That's if you want to be sheriff."

"I want to be, and I intend to be, but I'll be careful how I broadcast about the 'shiners, and thanks for tipping me off to the situation about the family stills," he grinned at her warmly. "You're quite a girl, Nora."

For a moment her eyes, wide and gold-brown and disturbingly lovely, met his. He saw a faint trace of color creep beneath her smooth, golden-tan skin. Then she got up and moved to the stove, where a big pan of apple dumplings sat simmering in its own cinnamon-scented syrup.

She came back with a bowl, holding one of the dumplings, and put before him a pitcher of cream so thick it had to be spooned on the dumpling.

"Plenty more when that's gone," she told him curtly as she served Julie a tiny dumpling and a larger one for herself. "I got to fix things sort of fancy for Julie," she explained. "She ain't got scarcely no appetite, and it's a trial and a job to get her to eat."

Nora bent over Julie, coaxing, and the child dug a listless spoon into the savory dessert in her bowl. The loving tenderness in Nora's face, the glow in her dark eyes caught Grady's attention, and he watched her, rejoicing to see her warm, womanly beauty relieved of her bitterness towards himself and his sex.

When he rose to help her clear the table, she looked shocked.

"Leave that be. That's women's work," she told him.

"I always help clear the table, and I always dry the dishes, when I've been fed," he assured her.

"Well, now that there is something else you'd best keep from the men folks if you want to be sheriff. They'd never vote for a man that helped a woman with her work."

Grady grinned at her. "Oh, well, maybe I'll get the women's vote," he said lightly.

She stared at him in reproof. "You ain't expecting women to vote, I hope!"

"Women are citizens, Nora," he reminded her.

"Women are also folks who have work to do, all of the work, mostly," she snapped. "Oh, sure a man'll load up his gun and call his hounds and go hunting, claiming he's got to 'meat' his family. But it'll be the women that tend the live stock and slop the hogs and set

the hens. Most of the women in the Valley help with the spring plowing, and do all the cotton picking and hoe the corn their good-for-nothing men folks make up into rot-gut and pop-skull. Women ain't got no time to go traipsing to the Corners for no such foolishness as voting."

"All of which, Nora, I intend to change," he told her.

Nora paused, her reddened hands in the hot, soapy dishwater and studied him. Then she sighed and shook her head as she went back to washing the dishes. "Well, I always heard that experience is a dear teacher, but there are some fools won't learn from no other." She dismissed the subject.

Grady polished the big old soapstone platter she handed him, and said after a moment, "I guess my only hope of winning the election is to appoint you my campaign manager, so you can warn me off all the dangerous planks in my platform."

"That's real neighborly of you, but I already got all the work I can say grace over," she answered.

"I know," said Grady. "You've got a family to rear, and there are three boys in it."

"There are."

"They'll grow up to be men, Nora."

"Yes," she nodded grimly. "That's been worrying me. I'm aiming to bring them up decent-like, as far as I can."

"Sure you are, Nora, and you'll do a bang-up job of it, I know," Grady said. "But wouldn't it help, if the Valley was cleaned up before the boys became men?"

"Oh, sure! It would help, too, if somebody was to leave us a million dollars in cash, only I ain't expecting nobody to," she said.

"The Valley can be cleaned up, Nora, and before the boys are grown men. If all the decent, law-abiding citizens get together and work at it," he pointed out.

Nora sighed, and swirled the greasy, soapy water about in the pan, before she carried it out on the porch to empty it into the slop cans for the pigs.

"Oh, I ain't saying you don't mean well," she admitted at last. "Only I'm just saying I don't think you can do it."

"Well, there's no harm in trying, is there?"

"No, there ain't no harm in that," she answered and said earnestly, deadly serious, her eyes for the first time warm and friendly, "I'm wishin' you well, Mr. Grady Kilburn. I'm wishin' you mighty well!"

"And you'll vote for me, Nora?"

She hesitated, and color burned hotly in her cheeks. "And be the laughing stock, the scandal of the whole Valley? The only woman that's pushed herself into men's business, voting and a-politickin'? Mister, I got worries enough and troubles enough without that kind of foolishment."

"You could be a leader among the women in the Valley, Nora."

"What would I want to be anything like that for?"

"To help insure the future for your family, Nora. What else?"

She stared at him wordlessly. Grady dropped the dish-towel, as he turned towards the door.

"Think it over, Nora," he said quietly. "I'll be back."

Before she could answer, he lifted his hand to Julie and smiled. "And you take good care of Susie and her children, Julie."

"Oh, I will, Mr. Kilburn. I will," said the child happily.

Nora stood where she was, until she heard the sound of the car going down the lane to the road. Her eyes were wide and startled. Grady Kilburn had given her a lot to think about, for true.

As she returned to her canning, however, it was not the campaign for sheriff she was thinking about, but the man himself. He had disturbed her, made her uneasy as no other man had ever done. As she realized that, a wave of bitterness and anger swept over her and lit sparks in her lovely eyes.

Chapter Three

WHEN NORA AND HER LITTLE BROOD ARRIVED at the church at Harmony Grove on Sunday morning, the children scurried off to Sunday School, while the elders, as was their wont, gathered beneath the friendly shade of the big trees to gossip and visit before eleven o'clock preaching. Inevitably, of course, the men were on one side of the church grounds, the women on the other. So it was that when Grady Kilburn crossed the yard to speak to Nora there was a small, startled rustling through both groups, and the women did not miss Nora's heightened color, nor the tartness in her voice when she answered Grady's friendly greeting.

Quite unaware of the fact that his greeting of Nora, his joining her on the women's side of the grounds had made them both targets for intense interest from both groups, Grady smiled down at Nora.

"Wonderful morning, isn't it?" was all that he said, but Nora, who was thoroughly aware of all the unwritten taboos of the morning hour beneath the shade trees that forbade a man to address a woman unless she was a member of his own family, was furious. The younger, unmarried boys and girls foregathered below the grove, where with much raucous laughter and horse-play among the boys, much giggling and squealing from the girls, the serious business of courting went on. That was not for her. Nor was Grady Kilburn's brash flaunting of traditions.

"It's a fine mornin'," she told Grady brusquely, feeling the eyes of the men and the women upon them, and very uncomfortable because they were singling her out. Under ther breath she said harshly, "Leave me alone."

She walked away from him with her head high and Grady, puzzled, stared after her, angry and frowning, before he turned and stalked back to the men. There he was greeted with laughter and murmurs that made him even more angry.

As always, Old Granny Whitham was the center of the group of women. Old Granny was known to be almost ninety years old. She had had three husbands and had buried them all. Now she lived, all alone in an ancient cabin, high on the mountainside, surrounded by cats, and dogs and chickens. She feared nothing and nobody. She was well-known to have an urgent interest in all people about her.

Now, as Nora walked towards the group, Granny's bird-bright eyes clung to the girl, and she gave an old woman's cackle as she spoke to her. "Looks like you got yourself a beau, Nora."

The other women tittered, for Nora, at twenty-four, was already in their eyes an old maid. In the Valley, a girl of fourteen was of marriageable age. Some of them married at twelve. By the time a girl was sixteen, if she was still unmarried her family began to get worried. If she reached eighteen and single still, hope faded. By twenty, she was accepted without question as a spinster. So long ago they had accepted Nora as belonging rightfully to their own group, and would have been scandalized if she had shown the slightest inclination to join the younger, unmarried group at their after-services skylarking.

Nora's face was hot, but her eyes swung around the group defiantly. "Mr. Kilburn's aiming to run for sheriff," she said curtly. "Reckon he think's he's got to make up to every man, woman and young 'un in the Valley to get himself elected."

The group tittered again.

"Well, he ain't expecting you to vote for him, is he?" Granny derided.

"He claims voting's women's work same's men's," snapped Nora.

The titter became a laugh of genuine amusement.

"Law, the crazy ideas these fellows pick up once they leaves the Valley," Granny wiped her eyes with a fragile, yellowed, old lace handkerchief that was her most cherished possession, one of her first husband's presents to her when they were sparking, before their marriage.

"Reckon you've heard the old Roper place has been sold," contributed Molly Blake, her eyes kind and warm on Nora's flushed face. "Fellow from Atlanta come up here and paid six hundred dollars in cold, hard cash for it."

There was a startled gasp, and Granny peered up at Molly reprovingly. "Now, Molly, you know that's just a tale," she rebuked. "Ain't nobody in his right mind going to pay no such a price for forty acres of wore-out land and a house that's plum falling apart."

Molly laughed. "Well, I didn't say he was in his right mind, Granny. Didn't I say he was a fellow from Atlanta?"

The others chuckled. "Well, I do hear tell that folks down there's got more money than sense," said Granny cheerfully. "Reckon the Ropers were right glad to come into all that money."

"Oh, they was," said Molly lightly. "Ain't none of them lived there

since Old Man Roper died two-three years ago. Too rough for them, living down to Rome and working in the cotton mills, making thirty-forty dollars a week. I hear they got a house with running water in it and a bathroom!"

Granny stared up at her. "Well, I do say!" Even Granny was impressed with such luxury.

"Fellow who bought the place claims he's gonna build him a summer home up there," Molly went on, relishing her usual position as purveyor of the news. It came naturally to her, since her husband ran the General Store and post office in the Corners. He was usually the first to hear any important news.

"A summer home!" gasped Granny. "You mark my words, girls, we'll be rid-over by flatland touristers before you can shake a stick!"

"Well, if all of them are willing to throw money around like this here Mr. Dexter, reckon that won't be so bad," said Molly sturdily. "I'd be proud to sell him Paw's old place, and I wouldn't ask him no six hundred dollars for it, neither."

"I heard he was gonna have the land cleared and build his house out of the lumber. They say he's dickering with Bud Thomas for his saw-mill and crew. He claims he wants to give the work of building to the men in the Valley, and it'll sure come in handy, too, this winter when the men ain't got no farming to do, and folks is hard-pressed to keep flour and lard in the house," chimed in plump, cheerful Mrs. Barlow.

"Well, now, that sounds right good," said Granny happily. "Men that's workin' ain't so apt to get in trouble with their stills."

"That's the truth," Nora put in.

The group stiffened, and each woman's eyes avoided her neighbors. No one looked at Granny, who glanced about at the taut, flushed faces and chuckled. She knew perfectly well that she had made them all frightened and uneasy by mentioning the men's winter occupation of 'stilling.' Everybody, of course, knew that practically ninety per cent of the families in the Valley had stills, that some of the men peddled the stuff. Nevertheless, it was a subject never mentioned outside the family. Only Granny would have dared.

The sudden eruption of the Sunday School classes from the pleasant old frame church behind them provided the women a welcome relief, and for Granny, as she prepared to rise from her seat, getting up was a task that took all her strength for her old body was bent with rheumatism, but one never dared tried to help her. Granny was,

said her neighbors, as "independent as a hog on ice," and sympathy or pity infuriated her.

Standing at last, leaning heavily on the stout old stick without which she was practically helpless, Granny said briskly, "Well, who's gonna feed Preacher today?"

There was a moment of awkwardness, and then Nora said quickly, "I dressed a nice fat hen yesterday, and there's plenty of vegetables. I'll feed him, Granny, if you'll come, too. It's a long time since you've been to Andersons', anyway."

"Well, naturally, nobody's expecting you to have a full-growed man in your house to eat unless there's an older woman there," said Granny. "I'll be right proud and pleased to eat with you and the Preacher and the young 'uns, Nora. It's right nice of you to ask me."

As a mark of her great favor, Granny accepted the offer of Nora's arm as an added support to her thick stick. Like the matriarch of the village that she was, she led the way across the yard and up the shallow steps to the interior of the old church, the other women following, chatting pleasantly, ignoring as though they had never seen them before, husbands, fathers, older sons in the group from the other side of the yard who were also going into the church.

To Grady, who had been told by the men that he had violated the customs of the community by publicly addressing a woman in the older group, the whole scene was completely fantastic. The small, ancient church, with its hard, uncushioned pews; the bare floor; the ugly, cheap colored glass windows; the stark simplicity of the white-painted pulpit, the awkwardly arranged vase of chrysanthemums and zinnias that stood on the table below the pulpit; the boys and girls in the seats behind the preacher, scuffling, muttering, with smothered laughter over the hymn books—all of it was typical, he supposed, of a country church.

There were several features which were peculiar to that part of the country, like the fact that one side of the church was occupied by women, the other side by men, with the center left for the engaged young couples, and those who were courting. The sheep and the goats, he told himself, and grinned wryly at the description, for it seemed rather apt. The women, docile, over-worked, patient drudges; the men quite sure that they were the lords of creation and that their women were as much their chattel, as their mules or hogs or cows. Grady had already learned that quite often a man was more kind and considerate of his live stock than of his family. A woman

cost nothing, and a man could usually get another one. Live-stock cost cash that was so hard to come by. Therefore, live-stock was the more cherished.

Grady didn't in the least care for the thought, yet as he looked over the church, he could not deny that there was truth in it. His eyes found Nora, sitting beside Granny, and he could not draw them away. She was gorgeous, tall, beautifully built. The perfect woman, the perfect mate, he decided, and smothered a grin at the thought of what Nora's reaction would be if he told her so.

Church was over. It was one o'clock by the time the gaunt, young preacher had finished with his sermon, delivered in a deep, sonorous voice that made its fervor particularly touching. Grady managed to be on the front steps when Granny and Nora came out.

The preacher was standing on the steps in the hot sunshine, shaking hands with the members of his flock. To Grady it seemed there was something anxious and worried in the young man's haunted eyes.

"Mighty fine sermon, Reverend," a man would say and not meet those anxious eyes.

Until Granny, still graciously permitting Nora to assist her, stopped and put her claw-like old hand in that of the preacher, and said firmly, "You was right good today, Preacher. Only I ain't agreeing with you. Not all the way, I ain't."

The young preacher smiled, and his eyes touched Nora's as though wishing to share his gentle mirth with her. "You're not supposed to agree with me all the way, Mrs. Witham," he said gently. "I can only point you the way as I see it. But God gave us a mind and a conscience that we can find our way for ourselves."

Granny nodded briskly. "That's the way I figger it, too," she told him cheerfully. "Nora and me would be plum proud, Preacher, if you'd come out to her place and take dinner with us."

Grady, lingering in the background, saw the flash of relief in the young man's eyes and realized, startled, that the preacher had feared he would not be invited to dinner by any of his parishioners. Why, the poor devil!

Grady had not realized that Granny was completely aware of his hovering there until she turned her bird-bright eyes on him, and said crisply, "Be right proud to have you, too, Grady. I knowed your Maw and your Granmaw, too. Fine women. Fine."

"That's wonderful of you, Mrs. Witham," said Grady eagerly,

and looked swiftly at Nora. "That is, if Miss Anderson will second the invitation?"

Color was high in Nora's cheeks, and she had pinched the skinny old arm clutching hers. Still, good manners demanded that she assure Grady of his welcome, and with as much warmth as she could muster, she said evenly, "Of course, Mr. Kilburn. There's a gracious plenty for all. We'd be right pleased to have you."

"Thanks, that's great then," said Grady and smiled warmly down at the old woman whose eyes were twinkling. As he smiled at her, Granny gave him a deliberate, mischievous wink.

When Granny and Nora reached the truck, Liza-Jane was standing beside it, an awkward, gangling youth of seventeen or eighteen carefully slicked into his Sunday best, standing beside her.

"Nora, the kids are picnicking down at Elder's Creek, and Jud wants me to go, too," begged Liza-Jane. Then her eyes fell upon Grady, and she blinked and widened them.

She was a lovely thing, her shining hair uncovered and gleaming in the sunshine like a new copper-penny. Her exquisite young body was outlined as seductively as Nora's stern discipline would allow, in a cheap, pale-green organdie dress, much ruffled and bowed.

Grady grinned at her warmly, and color flowed into Liza-Jane's lovely face as Granny said crisply, "Grady, this here's Nora's sister, Liza-Jane. This is Grady Kilburn, Liza-Jane."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Killburn," stammered Liza-Jane. She was obviously awed by Grady's good looks.

"He's going to take dinner with me, and Nora and the young 'uns," said Granny, her eyes dancing wickedly. "Preacher's coming, too."

"You're going to eat with us?" stammered Liza-Jane.

"Your sister's been kind enough to invite me," said Grady.

"He won't be eating with you, since you're going picnicking," said Nora, who had missed nothing of the change in Liza-Jane's manner since her eyes had met Grady's.

"Oh, but if we got company to dinner, Nora, I wouldn't think of leaving you to do all the work," said Liza-Jane. "You run along, Jud. I got to go home and help my sister."

"That ain't necessary, Liza-Jane," protested Nora.

"Well, goodness, Nora, I wouldn't think of letting you do all that work by yourself," protested Liza-Jane and climbed up into the truck, smiling down at Grady warmly.

Grady grinned and addressed Nora. "Why don't I bring Mrs.

Witham and the Reverend Stuart out with me in my car, instead of letting Mrs. Witham ride in the truck?" he suggested.

"That would be nice. The truck doesn't ride so easy, and Granny would be better off in your car," Nora agreed. Then she saw Liza-Jane's lovely face droop a little, as Granny and Grady stepped back. Nora put the old truck in gear and let it roll back down to the road, so the worn old motor would catch.

"Golly, Nora, ain't he something?" breathed Liza-Jane, glancing back at Grady, who was helping Granny into his car, saying something to the preacher, who stood anxiously aside.

Nora turned to her sharply, her eyes flashing. "Now, you listen to me, Liza-Jane," she began.

"Oh, jeepers, Nora, I've begged and begged you to stop calling me that silly name. You know how I hate it," Liza-Jane exploded.

"It was Paw's favorite song, reckon maybe because it was the one he knew real good, and that's how-come he named you that," said Nora.

"Well, knowing how you felt about Paw, how we all felt about him, I'd think you'd be glad to throw that silly name away and let me be called Liz, like I've begged you to," the girl pleaded.

"Liz? What kind of a name is that?" Nora mocked.

"Well, it's what folks call the Queen of England if they know her real well," said Liza-Jane. "But mostly it's what folks call the most beautiful star in the movies. Her name's Elizabeth Taylor, but everybody calls her Liz. She likes being called Liz. And oh, Nora, if you could see how beautiful she is!"

Nora smiled, and Liza-Jane flushed and went on after a moment, her tone slightly defiant. "Miss Purtel, my English teacher, loaned me a movie magazine, and it had a story about Liz Taylor, and Miss Purtel said that I looked something like her. That I was very pretty."

Nora's smile faded. "Is that why we have to pay high school taxes so fool teachers can fill the kids' heads with a lot of foolishment?" she snapped. "Maw always said 'handsome is as handsome does.' You just remember that, young lady, and you behave yourself today, you hear me? This Grady Kilburn's nearly about twice your age, so don't you go making no fool of yourself about him, you hear me?"

"Well, jeepers, Nora, don't you suppose I've got any sense at all?"

"That ain't a question I'd care to answer right now," Nora told her dryly, as she turned the old truck's nose away from the road and rattled up to the house.

NORA AND THE CHILDREN got out of the truck, as Grady's car came into the lane. Grady got out, helped Granny out and guided her up the steps and into the house. Granny turned on him swiftly.

"You go right back out there, Grady Kilburn, and be friendly-like with that poor critter," she ordered firmly. "I declare, I'm so sorry for that poor boy, I could purely cry."

Grady looked down at her, puzzled and amused. "What's wrong with him, Mrs. Witham?"

"Don't call me Miz' Witham. Call me Granny, same as everybody else does," she ordered and went briskly on. "Far as I can see, there ain't nothing wrong with Preacher. It's the folks he's been sent to preach to. It all comes of the Conference sending a flatlander to preach to mountain folks. They ain't got no business doing it, neither. Mountain folks hereabout want a preacher that preaches out of the Old Testament, all hellfire-and-brimstone. They wants a preacher who gets up there in the pulpit Sunday mornings and tells them what miserable sinners they are, and how they're gonna roast in hell-fire for time eternal if they don't mend their ways. Preacher here talks about God being a God of love, and anxious to forgive folks for their sins. Mountain folks don't like Preacher Stuart on account of that."

"Oh, come now—," protested Grady, glancing at Nora who nodded.

"Granny's right," she said.

"Well, of course I'm right. Ain't I always?" snapped Granny. "You know what would have happened to that poor critter if Nora here hadn't offered to feed him? He'd have gone hungry, that's what. There ain't no eating place in the Corners. Reckon he would have been ashamed to drive to the county seat for Sunday dinner, everybody over there knowing none of his flock would feed him at their own tables."

Grady said mildly, though there was a spark of anger in his eyes, "And I hear that churches spend a lot of money sending missionaries to foreign countries."

Granny bristled, but before she could speak, Grady had gone back out of doors, to where Preacher Stuart lingered uneasily, as though by no means sure of his welcome. Johnny and the other

children stood awkwardly about him, conscious of their manners to a guest, but not quite sure just what you talked about to a preacher.

Granny stood at the window watching, while Grady joined the preacher, and saw the instant ease that the children exhibited at his arrival. A little later, there was a wave of laughter from the small group beneath the old oak, and Granny nodded, satisfied.

"That's a right nice feller, that Grady Kilburn," she said briskly, unbuttoning the cuffs of her ancient black "church dress" and turning them back out of her way as she set about helping Nora to get dinner on the table.

"As good as you could expect a man to be," Nora agreed.

Granny, busily making gravy, stirring briskly, turned her head and studied Nora sharply.

"You know, Nora, it ain't natural for a woman like you to hate men so bitter," she chided gently.

"Ain't it?" Nora's mouth was a thin, bitter twist. "You knew Paw, seems to me."

"Sure, I knew your Paw. I've known a heap of men like him," snapped Granny. "I've known some that was mighty fine, too. I married three of them, and no finer men never stepped in shoe leather than my men."

"I'm glad of that," said Nora dryly. "But men are different nowadays, Granny."

Granny gave a snort of disgust. "There ain't been no difference in men since Adam let Eve sweet-talk him into finding out about the birds and bees," she scoffed. "Men's men, and women's women, and I reckon the good Lord knew what he was about when he made them like that. Men was made for women, and women was made for men, and I reckon that's how it ought to be."

Without giving Nora a chance to answer, she stalked to the door and sent out a hail, surprisingly loud and peremptory for one of her age and frailty.

"You, Liza-Jane! Get yourself in here and get the table set before I warm your britches!"

"Granny!" gasped Nora, shocked.

Granny chuckled and went back to stir the thickening gravy. "Reckon that'll bring her," she said happily.

A moment later, Liza-Jane stood in the doorway, scarlet-cheeked, blazing-eyed. "How dare you—!" she began haughtily, but wilted before Granny's stern glance.

"Don't give me none of your sass, gal," snapped Granny. "This here ain't your sister you're talking to. Now, you get yourself in that other room, and get the table set before I put a hex on you."

Some of Liza-Jane's anger and embarrassment melted before an uneasiness that crept into her eyes as she turned and switched her neat little bottom indignantly out of the room. Though school-teachers said superstition was nonsense, Liza-Jane was mountain-born and bred, and with mountain people superstition dies hard. Everybody said Granny was a witch and had evil powers, and even if she did not, only a fool would argue with her.

As the door banged shut behind her, Granny sighed and shook her head. "That one's going to be a handful before you get her married off, Nora," she warned.

Nora turned sharply, the big glass platter into which she was slicing ripe, red tomatoes on a bed of lettuce; the long, sharp knife in her hand forgotten as her eyes blazed at Granny. "See Liza-Jane married? I'd sooner see her dead and in her coffin!" she said.

"Now, that's fool talk if I ever heard it," snapped Granny. "Ain't you got sense enough to know being married is the only safety fer a gal like Liza-Jane? She's prettier than a spotted calf in a clover field in springtime. I've seen her wagging her butt and sticking out her bosoms at the fellows, and I've seen the way they look at her, and I've seen that she likes it. You mark my words, Nora—that gal's ripe for marrying—or something worse!"

"Granny! She'll hear you," scolded Nora, stiff-lipped, rigid with anger.

"I'm hoping you'll hear me, Nora. I'm an old woman, Nora, and I seen a heap of living, yeah, and a heap of loving in my time." Granny was in deadly earnest, her voice low-pitched, ominous. "And I'm warning you, Nora. Get that gal married decent-like, just as soon as you can. Or you'll be the sorriest woman who ever lived in these here hills."

Nora's hands clenched so tightly that the tomato she held in one of them squirted its blood-like juice over the table, and her knuckles were strained.

"And I'm tellin' you the day I see her wed, that'll be the saddest day o' my life," said Nora through her teeth. "Married to some trifling, no-account fellow who wants just to tumble her into bed and make her have a young 'un every year of her life, and work her like a mule, and treat her like dirt. I'd sooner see her dead!"

Granny sighed heavily and shook her head. "Nora, Nora, child," she mourned. "That ain't all of what being married means. There's love, Nora. I'm telling you, Nora, there's love. And it's the grandest, finest thing the good Lord ever put on this sinful old earth. It's what makes a woman proud and glad to bear a man's young 'uns and raise them up right. I tell you, Nora, if you got love, you don't need nothing else in God's world, and if you ain't got love, then there ain't nothing else that matters a damn."

Liza-Jane appeared at the dining-room door, innocent, demure, but Nora knew, with one glance into the girl's eyes that she had been listening to every word Granny had said. There were triumph and something of malice in Liza-Jane's eyes.

"I got the table all set, Nora," she said sweetly. "Shall I get the milk?"

Nora's heart sank beneath that bright-eyed malicious look, but she only said curtly, "The fresh-churned is in the crock closest to the spring house door."

Liza-Jane, carrying a huge, yellow glass pitcher tripped down the back steps and towards the spring house, which served as a refrigerator for such perishables as the farm produced. Nora, watching through the kitchen window, saw the flirtatious twist of the girl's hips as she came in sight of the two men who still lounged beneath the big oak tree. She was not at all surprised when, as Liza-Jane paused to open the spring house door, Grady joined her, and the girl looked up at him, laughing coquettishly. The two disappeared into the cool, dark interior of the spring house.

Granny said quietly, "You see, Nora? It's like summer nights when the door's open and them moth-critters wander in and kill themselves against the lighted lamp. There are women that just draw men to them same as the lamp draws them moth-critters, and fer women like that they ain't no safety except marriage."

"*Shut up!*" Nora, goaded beyond endurance, spat at the old woman, but the next moment she put a shaking hand on the skinny, old arm and said awkwardly, "Granny, I'm sure sorry. I didn't mean to tail out at you like that!"

Granny patted the shaking hand, and her eyes were warm and friendly. "You ain't got no cause to be sorry, Nora child," she said gently. "I'm a nosey old woman with a clattering tongue that's hinged in the middle and loose at both ends. Only I purely love you, Nora, and I'm just tryin' to warn you. I been here a long, long time, Nora.

Too long, I reckon. You had a hard time raising your young 'uns. It would purely break my heart if they didn't always give you cause to be proud of them."

"They will, Granny, they will—." Nora set her teeth above a sob as she heard Grady and the girl coming back to the house, Grady carrying very carefully the half-gallon pitcher with its creamy contents, and Liza-Jane smiling up at him, while she balanced in one hand a jar of pickles, in the other a jar of preserves.

"You didn't say anything about pickles or preserves, Nora, so I brought a jar of each," Liza-Jane announced sweetly, her diction precise and adhering faithfully to her schoolteacher's training. "Grady was bringing the milk, so I had both hands free." For a moment her eyes met Nora's and malicious triumph was in Lize-Jane's face.

"Guess we're ready now," Nora said curtly, and lifted the enormous soapstone platter holding the baked hen, succulently brown and tempting-looking. "Granny, reckon if you bring the gravy and the dressing, we can call the folks to dinner."

Grady smiled warmly at Nora, and at the look of cold hatred she gave him, he seemed to take an involuntary step backward as though she had struck him. As she brushed past him, his jaw hardened, and there was a glint in his eyes that made Granny stare at him, and then smother a chuckle in her scrawny, old throat.

A few days later, Nora was down in the orchard, gathering pears and apples, so absorbed in her task that she did not hear the sound of a car that stopped at the house. She was surrounded by three large tubs. Into one went the wind-fallen fruit that would be fed to the hogs. Into another went the apples fit for canning, or for saving for apple-pies, and into the third she gently placed the golden yellow pears which would be made into preserves, or baked for the children.

She stood sharply erect as a voice spoke behind her, and whirled to face Grady, who was standing there, watching her with a look she had never caught in a man's eyes before. It brought her startled heart into her throat and sent a shock through her.

"Did I startle you?" Grady asked, and saw the color that poured into her lovely face beneath its warm sun-tan. "I'm sorry. You look so beautiful standing there."

"What do you want?" she spat at him harshly.

Some of the warmth and eagerness went out of Grady's eyes. "This is a party call," he told her. "It's considered good manners in some

circles, to pay a call after a party and offer your thanks for hospitality. I wanted to thank you for having me out to dinner on Sunday."

"You ain't got no call to be thanking me. It was Granny that asked you," she reminded him.

"Sure. I called on Granny yesterday, and I thanked her. Also chopped her some firewood and made friends with her livestock. She's a grand old lady," said Grady.

"Well, now you thanked me, though you didn't have to," said Nora. "So you'd best be on your way."

Instead, Grady sat down on a tree stump, reached down for a blade of grass and stripped it between his fingers as he eyed her. "What are you afraid of, Nora?" he asked. "That you'll wake up some day and realize you're a woman?"

That strange disturbance that had sped through her blood at first sight of him was tormenting her again, and it sharpened her tongue still further.

"Afraid?" she sneered. "I ain't afraid of nothing that wears britches."

Grady nodded, and his eyes went over her. He took in the red-gold hair that had slipped a little from the old-fashioned bone hairpins that usually held it in a big, tight knot at the back of her proudly-poised head; the warm, lovely curves of her magnificent body, outlined by the limp cotton dress, washed so much that its original color had faded until it could only be guessed at. She was aware of the hard, deep breath that he drew as he threw away the shredded bit of grass.

"One of these days, Nora," he said softly, and now his voice added to the disturbance in her blood, "you're going to wake up to the fact that you're a woman and that you love a man."

She gave a harsh, bitter laugh, and her head was held proudly high, her eyes blazing with scorn.

"And that'll be the day I'll cut my throat," she told him.

He shook his head. "That'll be the day when you'll know real happiness for the first time in your life, Nora," he corrected her. "And the man you love is going to be the luckiest man who ever set foot on the ground. I'm hoping and praying I'll be that man."

"*You?*" she flung the word at him with such scorn and disdain that it brought him to his feet, his jaw set and hard.

"Me," he told her, and before she could guess at what he meant to do, he had reached her in a single stride. His arms had gone about her, close and hard, and had drawn her against his breast. Her out-

flung hands struck against his chest and beneath the thin khaki-colored shirt he wore, she could feel the hard drumming of his heart that seemed to shake her body as it did his.

For a moment she was too shocked to make the slightest movement of protest. She flung back her head and stared at him, her face going white beneath its sun-bronze, until it had an ashen look. Her velvety-red mouth, that had never known the touch of lipstick, was parted, and her teeth gleamed for a moment, tightly-clenched. Grady bent his head and set his mouth on hers.

For a stunned moment that might have been seconds or hours, she was too dazed to realize which, that demanding, urgent, terrifying kiss continued. Her whole body was shaken like a young tree in a winter storm. Her knees buckled, and she had to cling to him, lest she fall flat on the grass. There was a terrific roaring in her ears, and the blood ran hot and sweet in her veins. In that moment, she was so completely under his spell that he could have bent her back upon the grass and had his will of her.

Instead, his arms loosened, and he let her go. She stumbled backward until she brought up sharply against the old, gnarled pear tree, and clung there, staring at him, wide-eyed, dazed. The back of one hand went up to her lips as though she expected to find there some tangible evidence of that kiss, the first she had ever known.

"You see?" said Grady at last, and his voice was low-pitched, throbbing with passion. Though it was new and strange to her, something deep within Nora knew and recognized his feeling, and rose in urgent response to meet it. "That's what it's going to be like, Nora. I could have taken you, here and now, and you would have given yourself. You know that as well as I do, but that's not the way I want it. Not just now and then, Nora. I want you always, darling. I want to marry you."

Perhaps he knew what he was doing, breaking the spell that had gripped her so tightly. Perhaps he broke it out of his need for release from the terrible tension that had come so near accepting the wordless surrender she had offered. Whatever it had been, the spell was broken, and her knees stiffened and supported her.

She made a swift movement downward to the grass and came up, holding a small rifle tightly in her hands, its barrel aimed straight at him. There was such intensity in her eyes that involuntarily Grady stepped backward, raising a hand in protest.

"Get out of here!" Her voice was low and ragged, all the more

menacing for that. "You get out of here, and don't you never come back."

"That's not the answer, Nora—."

"This here's my answer." She patted the gun-stock lovingly, her eyes blazing at him. "You ever come near me again, Grady Kilburn, or you ever lay a finger on me again, and I'll blow you to Kingdom Come."

"You're being silly, Nora!" he told her sharply. "You're scared to death—."

"I ain't scared of no man, living nor dead!"

"I know that. You're scared of yourself," Grady told her.

She blinked in amazement, her brows drawing together in puzzled question. "Scared o' myself? What kind of foolishment are you talking?"

"It's not foolishness, Nora. You've sealed yourself up inside in that wall of hate for all men. You're scared to death that you'll have to let me inside, Nora, and you've got good reason to be scared. Because you want it as much as I do."

She was trembling, her blood rioting, her mouth still feeling the hard, bruising kiss he had burned there. But over and above everything else was her bitter, helpless fury.

"I ain't wanting nothing from you, but for you to leave me be," she raged at him. "I ain't wanting nothing, but for you to get in that car of yours and make tracks away from here. And don't you never come back!"

Grady smiled tautly at her, his eyes blazing. "I'm going, Nora, since you're in no shape to behave sensibly," he drawled. "But make no mistake about it, Nora. I'll be back. And you'll be glad to see me. And you're going to marry me, so you might as well begin getting used to the idea."

She caught her breath. "Marry you?" Her voice was shaking. "I'd sooner be dead!"

Grady studied her for a moment. The picture she made was one to stir a man's pulses like drum-beats. She stood against the bole of the old tree, her glorious hair tumbling about her face, the neck of her dress that had been torn open by her struggle with him revealing the uneven rise and fall of a superbly-molded, milk-white bosom that was in sharp contrast to the deep sun-bronze of her face and throat. Above her the cloudless blue sky, beyond her the rolling hills, the fruit-laden trees.

"Oh, no you wouldn't, Nora darling," he said at last, his voice low-pitched, caught with the passion that was tearing at him. "Being married Nora, is living, not dying. Once you know what it's all about, and I'm going to be the one to teach you, Nora, make no mistake about that you'll be crazy about it. You're trying to pretend you're a dried-up, man-hating old maid, Nora, but you're anything else but. You're a woman, Nora, a mighty lot of woman and you and I, Nora my girl, are going to have ourselves one hell of a time."

She was trembling so that she had to lean against the tree for support, but her hands were clenched tightly on the gun, and it was still aimed with a deadly accuracy at his stomach.

"*Git!*" she ordered thickly, her voice shaken with fury. "Git! And don't you never come back here or I'll blast you, so help me!"

Grady nodded. "I'll be back," he told her. He turned and strode back up the path to where his car waited.

Not until she had heard the sound of his car dying away on the still air did she drop the gun into the grass at her feet with nerveless fingers. Her body slid down until she huddled at the foot of the old tree, like a bundle of old clothes. Limp, boneless, so shaken by the wild storm of her fiercely aroused desire that she was powerless against the waves that rolled over and over her. Powerless even to think, to hate, to despise the man whose arms had pinioned her, whose desire had aroused in her something she had never known lay sleeping in the inmost depths of her being. Even in her dazed condition, she knew that that something, aroused, would never again be appeased until its hunger had been fed by what Grady offered, had so nearly forced upon her. She knew, with a creeping chill, that she would have accepted him; that she would have yielded her body to him in another moment of that wild, clamorous embrace. The knowledge terrified her and sickened her.

With her fancied hatred of all men, the thought of intimacy between men and women was something sickening. She was a farm girl, born and raised on a farm. The mating of the barnyard animals had been accepted as simple routine; the nature of the brute beasts. That human beings could mate as fiercely, as avidly had always seemed to her an evil thing that she, herself, would avoid until the day of her death.

Now Grady Kilburn had changed all that, and above and beneath the burning desire that tortured her and that shamed her so, there was a cold, hard wall of hatred, a bitterness that made her want to

see him suffer torture. She hated him! Because he had made her want him as no other man had ever been able to do. She moaned, and beat her clenched fists against the rough ground until they were bruised and bleeding, and felt the lash of her desire like a stinging whip about her body.

She had no idea how much time had passed before she managed to get to her feet, to stagger to the house. There, on the back porch, with its wash bench beside the well, she discovered the condition of her hands, and as she poured water into the basin, and laved her hands with strong, yellow soap, wincing at the pain, she raised her eyes thoughtlessly to the scrap of mirror that hung above the basin. She paused because the face that looked back at her was the face of a stranger.

Her eyes were wide and wild and held flames in their depths. Her wet hands fumbled, scandalized at the opening of her dress, and burning color flowed into her face as she realized that Grady had seen her torn dress, her dishevelled hair. Grady had seen her as no other man had ever done. She had been looking like a wanton, a no-good tramp of a woman, like one of the women who dwelt far back in the remote depths of the mountains, to whose cabins by night men made a narrow, carefully-trodden trail. Women who each spring were delivered of babies by Doc Barlow. Another "woods-colt" as the mountain people called these bastard creatures.

Grady Kilburn had done this to her. He had transformed her from a decent, God-fearing, self-respecting, man-hating woman, Nora Anderson, to the semblance of one of those creatures of darkness.

"Damn him!" she spat. "Damn him straight to hell! Damn him! The son-of-a-bitch!"

The words, spoken half under her breath, words she had never used before, rang so ugly and strange in her own ears that suddenly she burst into tears and leaned against the wall, weeping wildly.

Chapter Five

FOR A FEW DAYS, Nora lived in deadly fear that Grady would come back. She skulked about the house, giving up the freedom she had once known to wander far and wide and untroubled over the rocky hills. Then one morning something happened that put the thought of Grady, for the time being at last, out of her mind.

She was hanging out the washing, beneath a cloudless sky, feeling with pleasure the crisp tingle of the first touch of real fall in the air, when she heard a car coming up the lane.

She whirled, a wet garment in her hands, her eyes frightened as she listened. Then she recognized Doc Barlow's car, and a relief swept over her that was weakening in its effect. Until, as the car came closer, she saw that Julie sat beside Doc Barlow.

Everything else was forgotten as she dropped the wet garment and sped to meet the car.

"Julie! What's wrong?" she gasped.

"I got a nose-bleed," announced Julie proudly.

Nora gathered the thin little body close, and above the tumbled curls, her terrified eyes met Doc Barlow's kind, friendly ones.

"Now, no use getting into a swivet, Nora," he soothed her with a warning glance at the child. "Nothing's the matter with her. She got a nose-bleed like she says. Miss Cofer, her teacher, didn't know how to stop it, so she telephoned me. I went over, and I got the child, and when we got the bleeding stopped, I thought since I was passing by, I might just as well bring her home. Think maybe she ought to have a nap and rest a while in bed. She lost a right smart of blood."

He signaled Nora to silence, and Nora lifted the frail body in her arms and turned towards the house. She paused to glance back in terror at Doc Barlow, who nodded that he would wait.

When she got Julie settled and saw the child's eyes flutter into sleep, she crept out of the room and found Doc Barlow sitting on the back porch steps, smoking his battered old pipe, looking out over the scene, touched to glory by the colors of autumn.

"Mighty sightly place, Nora." He indicated with his pipe the scene before him.

Nora dropped down on the steps beside him and clutched his arm with both hands, peering with wild anxiety into his kind old face.

Doc Barlow was in his late sixties. For more than thirty-five years he had served with great devotion the men and women and children of the Valley. He was short, stockily-built, looking his age and more.

"What's the matter with her, Doc? Please, please tell me," Nora pleaded tremulously.

Doc Barlow sighed heavily and met her eyes straightly. "I wish I knew, Nora. I wish to the good Lord I knew," he admitted. "Organically, there's nothing wrong, but you and I both know that there is something. At times like this, I wish I'd been two men instead of one. Maybe I could have kept up with all the new medical stuff that's come along since I hung out my shingle up here, but with nothing much to do but deliver babies, bind up broken limbs, treat folks for rheumatism and such, I never had much call for advanced scientific stuff. I used to try to read all the new medical journals, and for a year or two, I went down to Atlanta to the conventions and the county medical association meetings. Then I got married and somehow, well, I just didn't keep in touch like I should have."

"You ain't got no call to go blaming yourself for being the best friend any man, woman or young 'un in these hills ever had," Nora protested.

"Thanks, Nora. But now when you need me to be very smart, and modern and up-to-date, I have to tell you that I haven't got the slightest idea what's ailing that youngster of yours," Doc Barlow sighed. "An allergy, maybe, only I wouldn't have any way of knowing what kind, or what she's allergic to. Could be something else. Could be damned near anything else. I just honestly don't know, Nora, and that's the truth."

White-lipped, Nora watched him with fear-distended eyes. "Is she—gonna—die?" She forced the words with all her strength.

Doc Barlow's bushy grey eyebrows went up. "Who isn't?" he snapped. "We're all going to die one of these days, Nora."

"That ain't what I mean, and you know it. Is she gonna—?" her voice broke against the dread word.

"I don't think so, and that's the honest truth, Nora. I don't think her illness is serious enough for that, not in the immediate future." He answered her unspoken question swiftly. "She just seems to be sort of fading, and if I could just get her to a hospital, where they modern equipment and up-to-date know-how!"

An iron first closed cruelly about Nora's heart. "A—hospital!" she gasped.

Doc Barlow went on, as though speaking his thoughts aloud, "There's a very fine hospital for children only, down in Atlanta. I don't know much about it, except that its whole staff is specializing in kids. It's sponsored by some high-falutin' society woman's organization, and the way I hear about it, if you can afford to pay for treatment, you do. If you can't pay, then you don't have to. Maybe it's only for Atlanta children, or maybe the children in the county. It may be for kids who need help no matter where they come from, like that place at Warm Springs for kids with polio."

Nora asked fearfully, "Could I take Julie there?"

Doc Barlow looked down at her gravely. "Would they take her, do you mean? I think it's quite possible they would, but you'd have to go with her, Nora. You'd have to pay for your room and board, and in Atlanta that costs a lot. Julie would grieve herself to death. She would die of loneliness and homesickness away off there unless you were with her."

"Yes, I reckon she would," Nora admitted.

"It would do no good to take her down there, unless you could be with her every day," pronounced Doc Barlow heavily. "And even if she could be taken into the hospital as a charity patient—."

Everything that was proud and blazingly independent in Nora flamed into fury at the word. "Charity? I don't want no charity fer her ner none o' the rest of my young 'uns. I'll pay fer anything we get. I always have, and I always will!"

Doc Barlow nodded, undisturbed. "Sure, I knew you'd feel like that, Nora, which is why I haven't mentioned it before," he admitted. "Maybe I shouldn't have, even now, but it just about kills me to watch the kid fading away, and know that if I was worth my salt as a doctor I'd be able to do something for her. And because of my stupidity, I can't!"

He knocked out his pipe and stood up, looking down at Nora where she still sat huddled on the steps.

"Doc, how much you reckon it would cost fer me to take her down there so's them folks could find out what was ailing her?" she asked.

"A lot of money, Nora," he told her. "Three, four, maybe five hundred dollars."

Nora gasped, and lifted a face drained white and ashen behind her sun-bronze. "Five hundred dollars?" she gasped and made a despairing gesture. "It might just as well be five million!"

Doc Barlow rested a kindly hand on her shoulder. "I know it,

Nora. I know it," he admitted. "Well, I'll fix her up a tonic and send it back by Johnny, or Liza-Jane, when they come home from school. Just take good care of her same as you always do, Nora. Try to get her to eat."

Nora made a gesture of hopelessness. "She doesn't eat enough to keep a bird on the wing," she said.

"No, I know she doesn't. But this tonic may give her a better appetite. Lots of fresh milk, and eggs and vegetables. But don't try to force her to eat, Nora. Stuffing a child that doesn't want to eat does them no good at all. Could do harm. Even a stupid old country doc like me knows that much," said Doc Barlow heavily.

She walked with him to his car, and there she lifted her white, strained face. "Doc, will you write off to that there hospital and find out anything you can about if they'd take her in case I can lay hands on some money?" she begged.

Doc Barlow, knowing that if the end of the year found Nora with ten dollars in cash money in her hands she counted it a good year, assured her he would.

She watched him drive off. Then she crept back into the house, and into the room where Julie lay sleeping. Nora stood above the bed, and looked down at the small, white face; the closed eyes, the long thick lashes that turned up a little, so beautiful they were. The tumbled darkly-red curls that sprayed the pillow. This small, defenseless creature who was her very heart; the one thing in all the world that she worshiped. She loved the other young 'uns, too, but Julie, the baby, had always seemed peculiarly her own. Maybe it was because her Maw had died when Julie was born, her beaten, pain-wracked body torn apart that the child might live. Maybe it was because Julie had always been "pindlin'," puny and had needed her so badly, and the rich warmth of her heart had rushed out to supply that need.

Julie adored her and trusted her so completely, and Nora had never failed the child before. The bitter realization, that now in the child's most desperate need she must fail her, drove Nora, blind and sick with pain out of the house and into the gold-and-blue day where she could sob out her heartache without disturbing the child's uneasy slumber.

Chapter Six

A FEW MORNINGS LATER, Nora was working in the sweet potato patch, digging and hilling the potatoes that would supply a large portion of her family's needs for the winter when she heard a car coming up the drive.

She stopped, stiffened and the patient old mule, hitched to the plow that turned up the potatoes, stopped, too, and started nibbling the dry, tough grass. In Nora's heart, since that stormy, passionate scene with Grady, the sound of any car in the lane startled her to a mingling fear and eager tension. As she strained her ears to listen, she realized this could not be Grady's car because it moved too smoothly, and with too little noise.

She dropped the plow reins and walked up the hill to the house, and saw a sleek, new, expensive coupe, its gleaming paint and chrome shining in the sun, the car of a stranger. She paused to eye the man, tall and broad of shoulder who slid from behind the wheel and went around on the other side to open the door and offer his hand to the woman who got out clumsily, clinging to his hand.

"Why, Granny Witham!" gasped Nora, wide-eyed as she went forward, glancing shyly at the stranger who smiled at her above Granny's head.

Granny preened herself like an old bird, color in her wrinkled old face, her bird-like eyes eager. "Howdy, Nora," she said happily and gestured towards the man to whose arm she still clung. "Let me make you acquainted with Mr. Jim Dexter. Mr. Dexter, this here is Nora Anderson."

"Hello, Nora." Dexter's smile was warm and friendly, and there was an amused twinkle in his dark eyes as he glanced down at Granny. "I hope we're not intruding on you when you're busy."

"There ain't no time of the day or most of the night when Nora ain't busy," said Granny briskly. "Nora, Mr. Dexter's bought the old Roper place, and he's fixing to live there. But he ain't got no place to stay till it's ready, so I told him you'd room and board him three-four weeks till he could get into his house."

Nora gasped, and looked abashed at Dexter, who was studying her with a lively, interested admiration.

"Why, law me, Granny, Mr. Dexter wouldn't like it here!" Nora

gasped. "We're awful plain folks. City fellow like Mr. Dexter wouldn't be comfortable here, the way we live."

"I don't know why not," snapped Granny before Dexter could speak. "You got plenty of room, and you set the best table in the Valley, account of you're the best cook. The way I look at it, he'd be mighty well took care of."

"But—but Granny—!" protested Nora.

Granny fixed her with a piercing eye. "If you're worrying about there ain't no inside plumbing, reckon Mr. Dexter done knows there ain't none in the Valley," said Granny and turned to Dexter. "The privy's out yonder behind the barn, but reckon most likely you could have a slop-jar in your room."

Dexter shouted with laughter as Nora, scarlet with embarrassment, wailed a stricken, "Granny!"

Composed, matter-of-fact, Granny said curtly, "I always feel like it's only fit that folks should have a clear understanding about such things, don't you, Mr. Dexter?"

"I do indeed, and the understanding is beautifully clear." Dexter's eyes were filled with laughter. "But I can see the idea of having a boarder doesn't appeal to Nora at all, and I don't blame her. Not many people welcome a stranger into their homes. I'll just have to stay at the hotel in the county seat and drive over night and morning."

"That hotel at the county seat's a plum pig-pen, and the vittles ain't fit to eat," snapped Granny, and addressed Nora once more. "Way I look at it, Nora, you got a spare room that ain't never used scarcely. You always set a bountiful table, and it wouldn't cost you nothing extra to have Mr. Dexter here. And I ain't being nosey when I say I know plum well you could use the extra money."

Dexter was smiling, friendly, genial at Nora. "I'd be glad to pay ten dollars a week, Nora," he said and at her startled look, added, "Or let's make it fifteen, and then I won't feel I'm being such a heel, moving in on you like this."

"Fifteen dollars a week?" Nora gasped incredulously.

"If it isn't enough—," Dexter began.

"Oh, it's plenty. It's—too much!" stammered Nora.

"Well, reckon it ain't too much for the both of us," said Granny coolly.

Dexter looked down at her, puzzled. "The both of us?" he repeated. "I don't understand."

"Well, Mister, you sure don't think I aim to turn you loose here

with an unmarried woman, all alone without no chaperone?" she snapped. "Why, the folks here in the Valley would be plumb scandalized. They'd maybe ride you out of the place on a rail, and ain't no telling what they'd do to Nora!"

"That's just foolishment, Granny, and you know it. Folks in these parts knows me well enough to know I'd behave myself!" protested Nora hotly.

"Sure, folks know you're a man-hating fool," said Granny. "Trouble is, they don't know nothing about Mr. Dexter. Nope, if he's coming here to board, I'm coming, too, and fifteen dollars a week ain't too much for the both of us."

Dexter grinned at Nora. "She's quite right, Nora," he said. "Rates at the hotel in the county seat are two-fifty a day, plus meals, and the drive to and from, night and morning, would be expensive, as well as take up a lot of time I'd rather put on my house."

Nora studied him shrewdly. "Mr. Dexter, how come you bought the old Roper place and how come you're aiming to live there?" she demanded.

"Nora Anderson! I'm purely ashamed of you, being nosey about other people's business! That ain't neighborly!" Granny gasped, outraged.

"She has a perfect right to ask for references, Mrs. Witham," said Dexter gravely. "It's customary. I expected it."

Granny peered up at him eagerly. "Then what are you doin' up here?" she demanded.

"I'm an oil man from Louisiana," said Dexter quietly. "The land there is below sea level, and it gets mighty hot. I've had a bout of malaria, and it crops up every so often. My doctor advised a few months in a mountain climate. I had been through this part of the country before, remembered how beautiful it was, so I decided to come here and see if I could find a place to stay. I got a little discouraged at the tourist accommodations offered at the places I stopped, and then one day I happened into the Valley, and I like it. I looked around for a place, and I discovered the Roper place could be had for a song and bought it."

"Well, now, I do say!" commented Granny with relish, thinking of the front place at the various "ladies aid" and similar meetings which would be hers because she knew why Dexter was here and where he came from.

Dexter smiled down at Nora. "So you see, if you could possibly

take me in for a few weeks until I can get my house livable, I'd be very much obliged to you," he said.

"Well, sure she's going to take you in." Granny did not give Nora time to answer. "She'd be a plum fool if she didn't."

Nora's shy smile answered Dexter's laugh. When he held out his hand, she put her own into it, and Dexter said, "Is it a deal?"

"Yes, sir, I reckon it is," Nora agreed, and Dexter's hand gave hers a firm, friendly pressure.

"Swell! I have all my belongings in the car. How soon could I come?" he asked.

"Reckon you might as well move right in. The room's always ready. It ain't used for nothing but funerals and weddings, and we ain't had a funeral since Paw died. But I keep it clean all the time."

"No weddings?" Dexter's eyes were teasing.

Color poured into Nora's face, and her head went up. "I don't hold with weddings account of I ain't got no use for men," she told him harshly.

"Oh, I'm sorry about that, Nora. I had hoped we could be friends," said Dexter.

Her eyes met his gravely, steadily. "I reckon maybe I could be friends with you, Mr. Dexter, because you're city folks. It's these here trifling no-account mountain fellers I ain't got no use for."

"Now, Nora, you ain't got no right to go calling them that," scolded Granny.

"I ain't taking it back, not none of it."

Dexter looked down at her, taking in the ripe loveliness of her body beneath the limp cotton dress, and his eyes warmed, until he realized Granny was watching him shrewdly. He had already learned the old harridan had an uncanny ability to read people's minds.

"Well, reckon you'd best get your things unloaded and then we can go pick up my relics," she said curtly.

Dexter paused, puzzled. "What relics?" he asked frankly.

"Well, for the land of Goshen, don't city folks know nothing? My relics is my clothes and such-like I'll need while I'm a-staying here," said Granny, and Dexter chuckled. He was going to enjoy himself here—if he did not go nuts while waiting out the time he had set himself to wait.

Nora helped him unload his car of his suitcases and belongings. Among his things was a heavy carton of books. When they had finished, Dexter smiled around the room in which he had placed his

belongings and nodded. "I'm going to be very comfortable here, Nora, and you're very good to take me in. I'll try not to be a bother. I'll be gone all day, of course, but at night, if there's any danger of my getting in your hair, just order me to my room, and I'll go meekly."

"Why, that's all right, Mr. Dexter. We'll be plum glad to have you. I just hope the young 'uns don't weary you too much," Nora assured him shyly.

"Oh, I'm very fond of children, Nora," he told her and answered Granny's peremptory summons to get her home so she could get her live stock attended to and her "relics" gathered up.

Nora stood on the porch, looking after the car as it sped down the lane, and her heart was beating fast. Why, Mr. Dexter was an awful nice man! Not like the mountain men at all. She could not picture Mr. Dexter knocking a woman about, or getting a skinful of "pop-skull" liquor and scaring his young 'uns plum off the place. It was the first time it had occurred to Nora that perhaps all the men in the world were not deserving of her bitter loathing and contempt.

Chapter Seven

WORD THAT THE CITY FELLOW who had bought the old Roper place was boarding at the Anderson home swept the Valley in that peculiar way news has of spreading in such isolated places. There, regardless of the fact that there are only three telephones in the Valley, and those all in the village itself, word wings from one isolated farm place to another in a manner similar to that reputedly used by tribes in the interior of Africa.

Dexter had made himself popular with the Valley people before he had been there a week. His manner of sauntering into the General Store, greeting the group that always huddled about the stove, winter or summer; the fact that he had hired as many of the Valley men as he needed, instead of bringing in skilled laborers from the county seat; most of all, the fact that in the Valley he was said to be "right friendly, and plain as an old shoe" made him liked and respected. His manner towards old Lije Plunkett, the village drunk, was exactly the same as he used with Banker Burns, or Doc Barlow, the Valley's two most respected and prominent citizens.

Though the Valley was perfectly willing to accept as right and proper Dexter's being a boarder at the Anderson place, with Granny Witham staying there to protect Nora from any loose-tongued talk, Grady Kilburn had an entirely different idea about it as he made plain to Nora a few days after Dexter had been installed at the house.

Nora was in the barn, busy with the evening milking, when the doorway of the barn was darkened. She turned, startled, to see Grady standing there.

She caught her breath and turned her face swiftly, resting her head against the smooth flank of Old Bess, the cow, as she said harshly over her shoulder, "What do you want?"

"As if you didn't know. But we'll discuss that some other time," said Grady. "I hear you're taking in boarders now."

"And that ain't no business of yours, Grady Kilburn!"

"As Sheriff—," Grady began.

"Oh," asked Nora innocently, "did you get elected?"

"Thanks for your frantic interest, but no thanks to your cooperation, I did," said Grady. "And as Sheriff, it's my business to know about strangers coming into the Valley."

"Well, Mr. Dexter ain't nobody to get all het-up about," snapped Nora. "He's a fine, nice man from down Louisiana, and he's up here for his health."

Grady up-ended an old feed-box, sat on it, and watched her. "So I've heard," he admitted. "Question is, whether it's true or not."

"I ain't got no cause to doubt him," said Nora curtly, deft fingers expertly stripping the final flow of milk into the big pail.

"Well, I haven't either, as a matter of fact," admitted Grady. "The only thing that puzzles me is why a man with the kind of money he seems to have would choose an out of the way place like Pilcher's Valley to settle in."

Nora poured milk into an old pan, where Susie and her latest brood of kittens promptly assembled and began lapping. "Reckon you don't think much of the Valley," she said over her shoulder.

"I think so much of the Valley that I intend to see law and order prevails here, if I die in the attempt," Grady assured her, with a trace of mockery in his voice.

Nora put the brimming bucket of milk on a low shelf out of reach of harm, and moved her milking stool to Old Bess' daughter, whose first calf, a young bull-yearling would amply provide the family with meat for the winter.

As she deftly washed the cow's udder, and began milking, Nora flung Grady a glance of derision. "Reckon if you break up the stilling and the crap games around here you'll just about have your hands full, Mr. Sheriff," she taunted. "Maybe you might even have time to do something about the men that think they got a right to whip their women any time they get mean."

Grady said nothing, and his silence puzzled her. She glanced swiftly at him, her busy hands proceeding automatically at the milking.

Even in the shadowy old barn she saw the hunger in his eyes, and something jerked her heart to awareness of the stirring thing that had been roused to life for the first time by his blazing kiss and that had never slumbered since.

"Nora, my darling," he said very low, his voice husky.

A flood of emotion so deep and so strange that it terrified her flooded Nora, and her hands slowed their task. The young cow, conscious of the slowing and the sudden fumbling of those familiar hands, switched her tail violently and shook her head.

"I ain't your darling nor nobody else's," Nora flashed, but her voice was shaken and sounded strange even in her own ears.

"You're mine, Nora, and I'm not going to wait much longer," Grady told her grimly. "I can take care of the children and help you raise them, and I intend to."

Nora was milking again, her hands not quite so sure and steady but finishing their task. Her head was turned to him, her face white in the dark shadows.

"Can you now? Can you get me five hundred dollars to take Julie down to the hospital to find out what's ailing her?" she sneered.

"Five hundred dollars?" Grady whistled. The sum was one that awed him. "Who says she needs to go to the hospital?"

"Doc Barlow," said Nora, and beneath the impact of the thought the hostility melted from her, and her voice was anxious and harried. "Oh, Grady, Grady, what am I going to do?"

She turned back and finished the job of stripping the udder of the final drops of milk in which was the most cream, a lesson she had learned so long ago that she could not even remember when it was. Then she stood up, and before she could lift the heavy milk pail, Grady took it from her and put it on the shelf beside the other one. He took Nora into his arms and held her comfortingly.

For a long moment, she lay against him, for the sheer creature-comfort of his warmth and tenderness. She had carried her burden of grief, and anxiety and worry alone for so long that it was a blessed relief just to know his soothing warmth. As he held her, that deep-lying hunger within her rose in a dark tide, demanding, insistent, no longer to be denied. She raised her face thirstily for his kiss, that burned deep down within her. As he felt her wordless, surging response, his own passion blazed higher. Then they were clinging together, borne backward by its insistent, throbbing tumult.

Prone on the great heap of sweet-smelling hay in a corner of the barn, out of reach of the faint, grey light that crept through the wide-open door, the inevitable came upon them. Wordless, exultant, her whole being crying out its frantic need to him, she gave herself with a voluptuous abandon that aroused Grady to a peak of ecstatic delight in which both gave, both took, until they were fulfilled and limp with the delight of knowing each other.

For a long moment then, they lay held close in each other's arms, savoring the moment towards which each had strained almost since the first moment they had met.

The deep darkness the mountain people called "full dark" had come before they were roused by a voice calling from the house.

Stricken with shame and shock, Nora recognized Dexter's voice saying, "I'll find her. Give me the lantern."

She whipped herself violently free from Grady's arms, and he heard her panting breath as she jerked her clothing into order. The way she struck aside his hand as he reached out to touch her, to still her into some measure of composure, was a savage blow.

By the time Dexter reached the barn, she and Grady were at the milk-shelf, lifting down the buckets, and Dexter spoke from the doorway into the gloom of the barn. "Nora?" he called and lifted the lantern. "Are you all right?"

"Sure, Mr. Dexter—I'm fine." Nora's voice was jerky, and Dexter's eyes sharpened a little.

"Mrs. Witham and the children were worried because it took you so long," said Dexter, and then the lantern's feeble gleam found Grady, standing tall and solid beside Nora. "Oh, sorry."

"Ain't no reason why you should be." Nora's voice was ragged, uneven. "This here's Grady Kilburn, Mr. Dexter. Sheriff Kilburn, he is now."

"Hello, Sheriff. I don't think we've met before," said Dexter pleasantly. "I heard about your winning the election. Congratulations."

"Thanks, Mr. Dexter. Glad to meet you. I've been wanting to," said Grady and the two men shook hands stiffly, like two prize fighters coming out of their corners before the big bout.

"That's very kind of you, Sheriff," said Dexter pleasantly. "Can I help you with that bucket, Nora? It looks heavy."

"Reckon it is," agreed Nora and let him take it, marvelling that a man would want to help a woman tote her load.

She led the way to the house, and the two men, each carrying a filled milk bucket followed her, each busy with his own thoughts, each sneaking a glance at the other, though they talked of casual things.

"My land of Goshen, Nora, I was plum worried about you," said Granny from the lighted kitchen doorway. "Supper's ready, and the young 'uns are about starved. Why, is that you, Grady Kilburn? I ain't seen you since you got to be Sheriff. I'm real proud a Valley man got elected."

"Thanks, Granny," said Grady and placed the milk bucket on the shelf above the water bucket. "Guess I'll be traveling."

"Well, now, you ain't going to do no such thing. You pull up a

chair and set. Supper's on the table. There ain't no call for you to leave here hungry."

Grady looked swiftly at Nora, who was washing her hands and splashing cold water on her hot face. She did not speak, and Grady's jaw hardened.

"Thanks, Granny, I'd be glad to, if you're sure it won't be any trouble," he said.

"Well, now, how'd it be any trouble? Just pull up a chair, and Liza-Jane, get Grady a plate," said Granny hospitably and bustled back into the house.

Dexter lounged in the kitchen doorway, and there was no chance for Grady to speak to Nora, as she hung the towel back in place and brushed past Dexter into the lamp-lit kitchen.

In the cheerful confusion of getting settled at the long table, with the lighted oil-lamp in the center, Nora slipped into her place, grateful that the yellow lamplight left her in the shadows, grateful that she need not face the keen eyes of either of the men or of Granny, grateful that she could concern herself as always with Julie's feeding.

The children were thrilled and delighted that Dexter had come to board, and he exerted himself to amuse and entertain them. Now and then his eyes traveled to Nora and stayed there for a long moment and then turned to Grady. Once, during the meal, Grady's eyes met Dexter's. The two men eyed each other coolly, measuringly, and it was obvious that there could never be any thought of real friendship between them. They had been sworn enemies from the time they had first set eyes on each other, and it would always be that way.

Granny was in high fettle. Her solitary life in the ancient and comfortless cabin high in the mountain had taught her to be self-reliant, self-sufficient. It was always her way to be contented with her lot, but it was also a fine thing to feel herself needed again. To look about this table, to realize that she had helped with preparing the food with which men and young 'uns filled themselves. That was a woman's job, in Granny's creed, and it was good to be able to do such a job.

When supper was over, and both men had refused a second helping of dried-apple pie, Granny rose and started clearing the table, saying briskly to Nora, "Now, you run along and tend to the milk, Nora. Me and Liza-Jane'll wash up these here dishes."

"Let me help?" suggested Dexter pleasantly.

"Law me, Mr. Dexter, this here's women's work," protested Granny,

scandalized at the idea. "You and the young 'uns go on in by the fire. Me and Liza-Jane'll do these dishes in no time at all."

It was Granny, not Nora, who caught the slant-eyed glance that Liza-Jane gave Dexter, and which Dexter returned with an amused grin. Granny's sharp, old eyes narrowed, and her voice as she spoke to Liza-Jane was unnecessarily caustic.

"If you're sure you don't mind, Granny?" Nora hesitated.

"Mind nothing! That there milk's got to be strained and set fer the cream to rise before breakfast. Now you get along and tend to it," urged Granny, and Nora made her escape thankfully from the presence of Grady, who had been trying to meet her eyes since they had come into the house.

Nora reached above the shelf on which the water bucket stood, to take down the heavy buckets of milk. Grady reached a long arm beyond her, lifted the buckets effortlessly, and said curtly, "You bring the lantern."

"Ain't no call for you to help. I don't need your help," she protested, but he had already gone down the steps and along the path to the old spring house, where she had to follow him, carrying the big, old lantern.

As he reached the long shelf where the big, brown earthenware crocks stood waiting, he set down the milk buckets, and turned to Nora, to take the lantern from her. She swung it quickly between them, and stood back, her eyes blazing in a face that was ashen-pale behind its sun-bronze.

"Stop that foolishness! You want to burn the place down?" snapped Grady and took the lantern roughly from her and set it out of harm's way on a small shelf built for that purpose. "About what happened out there in the barn, Nora—."

"I ain't going to talk about it." She flung the words at him harshly, her voice shaken and ragged. "It was nasty, and evil, and sinful and I hated it."

"You're lying, Nora, and we both know you are lying." Grady's voice was low-pitched, rough with passion. "It was meant to happen. It had to happen. I wish it could have been different."

"It ain't never different. It's always like that. The only thing a man ever wants from a woman," she spat at him savagely. "That, and for her to work herself damn near to death, cooking and waiting on him, and having his young 'uns. And I purely hate you, Grady Kilburn. I hate you!"

"No, you don't, Nora. You love me as I love you," said Grady. "If you hadn't wanted it as much as I did, you'd have screamed, struggled, fought, but you didn't, Nora. You didn't. It was wonderful, and glorious, and it's just a beginning for us, Nora—because you're going to marry me and soon."

"I ain't never going to marry you," she exploded. "You nor no other man. Not never!"

Grady stood between her and the door, and she knew she could not get past him. If she moved towards him by so much as a foot she would be once more in his arms, and the good Lord only knew what would happen then.

"Nora, Nora, you poor blind darling!" said Grady heavily. "So full of hate and fury that you won't even listen to your own heart."

"I'm a-listening, and it's telling me to order you off the place," she told him.

She turned to the shelf behind her where the big crocks stood. Her hands were shaking as she whipped out two immaculately clean cheese cloth "strainer-rags" and tied them over the tops of the crocks. Her hands were shaking as she lifted the first bucket and with the ease and deftness of long practice, so that her actions were automatic, she began slowly pouring the milk through the straining cloths.

Grady watched her, his arms folded, leaning back against the closed door, his jaw set and hard, his eyes bleak. "I wish I knew how to talk to you, Nora," he said at last. "You're so wrong, darling, only I just don't seem to be able to think of the right words to make you see that. I love you, Nora. I wouldn't hurt you, or shame you for anything in the world."

She flung him a bitter glance, bright with loathing. "Oh, wouldn't you? That sounds kind of funny, coming from you! I'll be shamed the rest of my life. I ain't a decent girl no more, and that's your fault, Grady Kilburn."

"You have no reason to be ashamed of what happened, Nora," he told her sharply. "You're going to marry me."

"I ain't neither. I'd sooner build me a shack out in the woods and breed woods-colts." She flung at him what she knew would hurt him most. "Offering my bed to any fellow that would give me a dollar or a drink of pop-skull whiskey."

Grady took a swift step towards her, and as she jerked back, some of the milk splashed out and was spilled on the damp, earthen floor.

"You get away from me," she raged at him and put down the half-

with an unmarried woman, all alone without no chaperone?" she snapped. "Why, the folks here in the Valley would be plumb scandalized. They'd maybe ride you out of the place on a rail, and ain't no telling what they'd do to Nora!"

"That's just foolishment, Granny, and you know it. Folks in these parts knows me well enough to know I'd behave myself!" protested Nora hotly.

"Sure, folks know you're a man-hating fool," said Granny. "Trouble is, they don't know nothing about Mr. Dexter. Nope, if he's coming here to board, I'm coming, too, and fifteen dollars a week ain't too much for the both of us."

Dexter grinned at Nora. "She's quite right, Nora," he said. "Rates at the hotel in the county seat are two-fifty a day, plus meals, and the drive to and from, night and morning, would be expensive, as well as take up a lot of time I'd rather put on my house."

Nora studied him shrewdly. "Mr. Dexter, how come you bought the old Roper place and how come you're aiming to live there?" she demanded.

"Nora Anderson! I'm purely ashamed of you, being nosey about other people's business! That ain't neighborly!" Granny gasped, outraged.

"She has a perfect right to ask for references, Mrs. Witham," said Dexter gravely. "It's customary. I expected it."

Granny peered up at him eagerly. "Then what are you doin' up here?" she demanded.

"I'm an oil man from Louisiana," said Dexter quietly. "The land there is below sea level, and it gets mighty hot. I've had a bout of malaria, and it crops up every so often. My doctor advised a few months in a mountain climate. I had been through this part of the country before, remembered how beautiful it was, so I decided to come here and see if I could find a place to stay. I got a little discouraged at the tourist accommodations offered at the places I stopped, and then one day I happened into the Valley, and I like it. I looked around for a place, and I discovered the Roper place could be had for a song and bought it."

"Well, now, I do say!" commented Granny with relish, thinking of the front place at the various "ladies aid" and similar meetings which would be hers because she knew why Dexter was here and where he came from.

Dexter smiled down at Nora. "So you see, if you could possibly

The tears were sliding down her face, and he could see her body shaken by the storm of her near-hysteria as she stood pressed hard against the wall, her hands tightly clenched. Because it would have been worse than useless for him to go on trying to talk to her, he turned at last and walked out into the crisp autumn night.

Nora stood pressed hard against the wall, her head lifted, the tears sliding down her cheeks, until she heard the sound of his car dying away. Not until then did she drop down on an old broken stool and put her hands over her face and give way to the wild emotion that shook her.

That episode in the barn had come upon her with such startling suddenness that she had had not a second to realize what was happening until it was too late. There had been a radiant delight, an ecstatic joy in her surrender, but Dexter's interruption had come in a manner that filled her with a guilty shame. If Dexter had not come, if Grady had had the opportunity to soothe her after the storm of passion, to reassure her, to be gentle and tender with her as he had ached to be, things might have been very different, but almost in the very moment of the peak of their fulfillment of their urgent need, Dexter's voice had jerked them apart.

She had been conscious of her disordered clothing, of Grady's fumbling hands, and the bleakness of shame and a feeling of degradation had swirled over her. The necessity for separation, for assuming a matter-of-fact appearance, the urgency of presenting a stolid appearance to Dexter had thrown her straight from that height of ecstasy to an uneasy feeling of shame. Having to face Grady in the lighted kitchen so short a time after their mutual sharing of passionate fulfillment had driven out of her mind all thought of anything but shame. It had destroyed the memory of delight and rapture. If that was what being in love meant—. She shuddered sickly at the thought.

She did not know how long she crouched there before at last she pulled herself together and made herself complete the straining of the milk. She took off the soggy strainer cloths, dropped them into a pan and poured water over them. She was tying new cloths snugly around the tops of the crocks, when Granny appeared at the doorway, peering into the shadowy gloom.

"My sakes, Nora, I was plum worried about you. What's taking you so long? I heard Grady leave long ago."

"I reckon I was thinking, Granny," stammered Nora, and her voice still held the huskiness of her tears.

"Reckon it wasn't happy thinking. You been crying, child?" Granny's voice was gentle, and the tears sprang again to Nora's eyes.

"Reckon maybe I have, Granny. I'm worried sick about Julie," said Nora and reminded herself it was not really a lie.

"The child is right pindlin', seems like. She don't relish her vittles none, and she's as poor and skinny as a snake," Granny admitted frankly. "What does Doc Barlow say about her?"

"He wants to take her to Atlanta to a hospital, soon's I get the money," Nora said.

"My sakes, gal, that would take a heap of money," said Granny, awed. "That why you was willing to let Mr. Dexter come and board?"

"That's why."

Granny chuckled dryly. "Then you'd best get in the house and take the Wish Book away from that Liza-Jane. She's got her nose buried in it, finding all kinds of pretties she's aiming to buy with Mr. Dexter's board money," she warned. "Reckon you ain't told her the money's for Julie."

"Reckon I'd best tell her then, before she gets too busy spending it," Nora agreed and followed Granny back to the house, Granny carrying the lighted lantern, Nora carrying with accustomed ease a huge crock of souring milk to be placed in a warm spot so it would "clabber-up" in time for tomorrow's churning.

Chapter Eight

DEXTER'S PRESENCE IN THE VALLEY brought a new and very welcome change to the usual winter scene. Generally, when a man got in his crops and had them all safely under shelter, he had nothing to do except the daily feeding of the live stock and the chopping of wood for the winter. Since in most farmhouses these were usually done by the women folks, the men were free to come and go as they pleased. A few, if they had been too improvident or too unlucky to have raised enough hog meat and beef stuff to feed his family for the winter, might pick up his shotgun, whistle his hounds from under the house and go hunting. Mountain men hunted, not for sport like the city people, but to "meat their families." Once that had been attended to, the wild things of the mountain were safe.

Now that Dexter was hiring men to work on the old Roper place, however, there was a new eagerness about the Valley. The wages Dexter paid were enormous in the eyes of mountain people, who were accustomed to wresting a living from the soil, and to whom cash-money was such a rarity. Many people among them excused the ones who stilled their corn crop into moonshine and peddled it, with the explanation that a man had to raise himself a little cash best way he could.

Dexter was friendly and pleasant, and the mountain people soon got over their awe of him and accepted him almost as one of themselves. They worked on his place with the good will and the heartiness with which they would have worked, with no thought of payment, on the places of their friends and neighbors, but they were very grateful and very happy over the wages paid them.

Bud Hawkins, down at the general store, was kept busy making out mail orders for items selected from the Wish Book and dispatched to the big mail order store in Atlanta. Women arrived at church on Sunday morning, preening like peacocks over new hats. Children, who had worn cut-down coats made from old Army blankets or from discarded garments, were now encased in snug, warm, bright-colored new coats, and those whose fathers did not work for Dexter were bitterly jealous.

Liza-Jane complained long and loud that the coat she had selected from the Wish Book was not to be hers, and even when Nora ex-

plained to her that they must save every penny for Julie, Liza-Jane sulked. Nora had little time or thought to give to Liza-Jane's bad temper, however, for the work of getting her family ready for the gruelling mountain winter was upon her.

Granny was a tower of strength and wisdom those days. Dexter made himself part of the family, accepting pleasantly whatever came about. He left the house soon after seven-thirty every morning, and though at first he had protested, good-humoredly, at the lunch bucket Granny prepared for him just as she prepared them for the children, he accepted with good grace, and eventually, with gratitude the ample provisions made for his mid-day meal on the job. He came home at "first dusk" in the evening, ravenous, cheerful, regaling the children with amusing stories and showing to Granny and Nora a gallantry that left them wide-eyed, so unaccustomed were they to such gracious acts from the men folks.

At last the house was finished and ready for him, and he announced at supper the night before he was to move into his own place, "I'm having a housewarming Saturday night, and everybody in the Valley is invited."

"A housewarming?" repeated Granny, puzzled. "Surely to goodness, Mr. Dexter, you ain't for somebody to bring fire to you to light your hearth? Why, I ain't heard tell of nobody doing that in the last ten-twenty years. Used to be, when I was a gal, everybody done it."

Dexter stared at her, delighted. "Now that sounds like another mountain custom that is new to me, Mrs. Witham," he said. "Explain it to me."

Puzzled at his eagerness, Granny said, "Well, my sakes, Mr. Dexter, it don't take no explaining, much. Just that when folks built them a new cabin they laid them a fire ready to light on the hearth, and then somebody brought them a shovelful of live coals or a flaming knot, and started the fire to burning. And folks never let that fire go out. I know of places on the mountain where the fire had never gone out for more than a hundred years. Of course, in them times matches were so scarce lots of us didn't ever see one. Nowadays, of course, folks has all manner of new inventions. Reckon nobody never bothers lighting a neighbor's fire no more."

Dexter was delighted. "That's a lovely custom!" he said and turned to Nora. "Will you light my hearth fire for me, Nora?"

She colored beneath his warm glance and said, "Why, I'd be right proud to, Mr. Dexter."

"And I'll see to it that it never goes out!" said Dexter. "Just the way your friendliness and kindness has warmed my heart, Nora, I'll always remember that a part of your hearth fire will always warm my house."

Granny looked sharply at him and then at Nora, and sniffed. "Reckin it would be a sight of trouble to carry a shovelful of live coals from here to your place without setting something afire on the way," she suggested.

"I'll figure out a way for that," Dexter said quickly. "I insist on having my fire lighted that way. You'll have to ride over with me early Saturday afternoon, Nora, and light the fire, and then I'll want your opinion on the house, and the preparations for the party."

"Are you going to have a play party, Mr. Dexter?" demanded Johnny.

"A play party? If you mean the same thing I mean by a housewarming, sure, Johnny. I want all my friends and neighbors to drop in and see my place. And I hope they'll accept me as a neighbor and drop in often," said Dexter and glanced around the big, shadowy dining room. "Come to think of it, I'm going to miss you all, and I'm afraid my house is going to be pretty lonely, now that I've gotten accustomed to being here with all of you."

"Who you aiming to have to do for you, Mr. Dexter?" asked Granny with lively interest, and then as he gave her a puzzled glance, she chuckled. "You been here a right smart while, Mr. Dexter, but you still ain't learned to talk like no mountain folks. I'm asking you who's going to cook for you, and keep your house clean and do your washing?"

Dexter joined in the friendly laugh at his expense. "Oh, I'm a pretty good cook, Mrs. Witham, and not a bad hand at cleaning. I'll have to find a laundress, of course. Maybe you could recommend somebody?"

"I'd be pleased to do your washing, Mr. Dexter," said Nora eagerly. "It wouldn't be no extra work. I got my own to do every week, and I wouldn't even notice what you have."

"Then that's settled, Nora, and I'm very grateful. I'd rather pay you for the job than anybody I know of, and I hope you can supply me with milk, and butter and eggs, too," said Dexter happily.

"You ain't aiming to keep no live stock? Not even a hog?" protested Granny, scandalized at the idea of the Roper place without a cow, hens, hogs and a mule.

"I want to be perfectly free to go away for a week or two at a time

if I want to, with no live stock to bother with," Dexter assured her. "No, I'll buy what I can from Nora, and I'll be bringing in frozen foods and stuff. Any man can be a fine cook if he only knows what to buy. Quick-frozen foods and canned goods are a life-saver to a man who's living a bachelor's life."

There was an amused twinkle in Granny's bird-bright eyes. "Reckon you ain't going to be bacheloring it long, Mr. Dexter, unless you're warier than a shot-over bird-dog," she said. "Heap of gals round these parts is plum honing to get themselves married up."

Dexter laughed. "And there's a heap of likely-looking young men, too, Mrs. Witham, a lot more attractive to a girl than I am," he disclaimed modestly. "Who'd want an old beat-up guy like me?"

For just the barest moment, Granny's eyes flickered to Liza-Jane's flushed face, bent above her plate, and then to Nora. "Reckon you wouldn't have to look too far to find one," said Granny mildly, but the significance of her glance had not been lost on Dexter, though he kept his eyes on Granny.

"I've never been much of a hand at romance," he said coolly. "But a man's a fool who says 'I'm never going to get married.'"

"Ain't it the dying truth?" applauded Granny. "Well, everybody had enough? Then reckon we might's well clear the table."

As they all stood up, Nora said briskly to the children, "You young 'uns best get busy with your home work."

Horrified, they all protested vigorously.

"Tomorrow's Saturday, Nora!" It was Johnny who made the accusing reminder.

"So do your home work tonight, so you'll be ready Monday morning, if you all want to go to Mr. Dexter's play party tomorrow night," said Granny.

"Aw, cripes, do we have to, Nora?" whined Jennie-Sue.

"You have to," said Nora. "You heard Granny. Scoot, now."

Dexter offered assistance, was refused and went outside to smoke his pipe. It was a night of brisk chill, a cloudless sky, a thin, pale moon riding high above the humped shoulders of the mountains. When Nora went out an hour later, to empty the dish water into the pigs' slop bucket, she paused for a moment, straightened her tired shoulders as she looked out over the quiet beauty of the night.

Unbidden, unwanted, came the thought of Grady Kilburn. She had not set eyes on him since that tumultuous night in the barn. On the heels of the thought came her harsh assurance to herself that

that was the way she wanted it to be. She had ordered him off the place and forbidden him to return. If he had taken her at her word, what else had she expected? Or wanted?

The memory of that night in his arms, on the sweet, dusty-smelling hay, would be with her as long as she lived, but with all her strength she tried to fight it down, deny it, overlay it with the realization of her shame and her degradation. She thought of Meg Thatcher, and shivered in the chill night. She could never be a Meg Thatcher, she comforted herself. She had the young 'uns to raise, and she had to set them a good example. Her mouth twisted with the thought. A damned fine example she was! Wallowing around in the hay with the first fellow who kissed her!

She was startled out of her bitter thoughts by a sudden, stealthy movement in the thick hedge of cedars that bordered the lane, shutting off the orchard from the house garden. She stiffened, listening intently. The country woman's instant thought was of a "varmint" from the woods, intent on molesting the chickens.

The sound came again, and then she saw a shadow emerge from the hedge and come running lightly towards the house. She herself stood in the shadowy porch, invisible to the person coming towards her. The shadowy figure reached the foot of the kitchen steps, and Nora caught her breath. It was Liza-Jane who was hurrying up the steps.

"What you been up to?" Nora demanded as she stepped to meet the girl.

Liza-Jane gave a small, frightened scream and jumped back, grasping one of the porch posts to keep from tumbling backward down the steps.

"Hey, you darned near scared me simple," protested Liza-Jane. "Where've you been?"

Liza-Jane tossed her head. "That's a right silly question, when we haven't got no inside toilet," she answered pertly.

"The privy ain't that-away," snapped Nora.

Liza-Jane groaned. "Nora, do you have to be vulgar? Can't you call it a toilet, like other folks do?" she protested.

"Whatsoever you call it, it ain't that-away," Nora insisted.

"Well, good grief, Nora, I didn't want to come right past Mr. Dexter, did I? He's down yonder, close to the barn, so I come around," snapped Liza-Jane and stepped past Nora to the kitchen door. "And I'm darned froze, too."

Nora followed the girl into the kitchen, her eyes on the flushed, bright-eyed face, unwilling to accept the very logical explanation, yet reasoning with herself that it was silly not to.

"Well, you go along and get your home work done like the rest of the young 'uns," Nora ordered her.

Liza-Jane lingered in the doorway, a tiny, secretive smile curving her soft mouth. "You think I'm still a young 'un, don't you, Nora?" she drawled, and there was malice in her tone to match the almost fever-brightness in her eyes. "Well, I'm not. There's plenty folks think I'm growed up. Plenty growed up enough to get married."

"Liza-Jane!" gasped Nora.

The smile deepened on Liza-Jane's lovely mouth. "Mark one thing, Nora. We might as well get it settled now. I ain't aiming to be no old maid like you," she flashed and was gone before Nora could catch her breath.

Nora stood for a long moment, rigid, her fists clenched. So Liza-Jane was grown-up, was she? And beginning to think of marrying, was she? Nora, remembering unwillingly because she could never forget that hour with Grady Kilburn, was sickened at the thought of Liza-Jane enduring that. Not just for a breathless, shaken time, but for always, every night of her life. Liza-Jane's slim young body growing big and ugly with an annual baby. Her lovely face becoming care-worn and haggard with drudgery and putting up with some man's evil temper. Nora could not endure the thought. Not Liza-Jane, so slender, and gay and pretty; so lively and radiant; so young! It must not happen to Liza-Jane. Leaning there, her clenched fists hard against her white face, Nora wept soundlessly and bitterly.

EARLY IN THE MORNING, Dexter got into his car and drove off, assuring Granny and Nora he would be back by lunch time. It was almost one o'clock, though, when the car came back up the drive, and he started lifting out large and small packages, while the children danced about him in excitement.

"This is for you, Jennie-Sue." He gave her a small, oblong package. "And this for you, Johnny."

There was a package for each child, and when he had distributed them, the last a big square box for Liza-Jane who made no move, as the younger children did, to open it, he lifted two more packages and took them up to the kitchen steps, where Nora and Granny stood, shivering in the cold wind.

"For you, Granny Witham." He offered the package, smiling. "And there's this one for you, Nora. I hope you'll like them. I had to let the salesgirl make the selection, because I don't know much about shopping for women folks."

Granny's shaking old hands brought from the package a long, soft stole of ruby-red wool that her eyes clung to with a passionate delight. "A fascinator!" she breathed. "Why, law me, I ain't seed one of these since my second husband's Maw knitted me one."

Dexter laughed. "A fascinator? Is that what it is? The salesgirl called it a stole and said they were very fashionable."

"Well, now, I do say! Fashionable, is it? Why, I remember when I was no bigger than Julie there, my Maw would never let me out of the house come first fall chill without my fascinator wrapped close. And now city folks is wearing them. Well, it just goes to show, even city folks is right smart sometimes about not catching cold."

Nora was smiling, dewy-eyed, at Dexter, because Julie was in a paroxysm of delight and awe over the handsome doll, with long, golden curls, a fancy organdie and lace dress. The discovery that the doll could open and close its eyes was to Julie the final incredible joy. She could not speak at all. The child was too overwhelmed.

"You're the finest man I ever seen, Mr. Dexter. I'm obliged to you. I ain't got no words to tell you how much," said Nora above the lump in her throat. Nora was intensely moved by his kindness that had so transported the child to a radiance Julie had never before known.

Dexter laughed and said, imitating the mountain drawl, "Aw, shucks, it wasn't nothing scarcely."

"It was, too," said Granny vigorously, as she draped the stole about her head and shoulders and rubbed her cheek lovingly against its soft warmth. "My sakes, feels softer than a kitten."

Liza-Jane had disappeared with her unopened package, and Granny demanded eagerly, "Nora, you ain't opened yours. What's in it?"

"I don't know that I ought to take any more, Mr. Dexter. All them things you've give the young 'uns," hesitated Nora, her fingers already fumbling with the wrapping, bringing out of it a soft amber-colored cashmere sweater.

"I hope it fits, Nora. I had to guess at the size," said Dexter eagerly.

"Fit? Don't make no diffunce if a thing as pretty as that fits or not, do it, Nora?" gasped Granny. "Just holding it in your hands and feeling how soft it is and what a pretty color, that's pleasure enough."

"And it's too pretty to wear anyway. I wouldn't want it to get dirty. Oh, Mr. Dexter—!" and Nora burst into happy tears, to Dexter's acute dismay.

Julie, seeing her idol weeping, followed suit. Jennie-Sue, with a doll as beautiful and a little larger than Julie's, stared from one to the other in swift alarm, but Johnny and Bill, armed with air-rifles, had already departed at a gallop to pop at birds or anything else that moved.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, Mrs. Witham, make them stop," protested Dexter.

Granny chuckled and wiped away a tear.

"Them kind of tears is good for a body," she assured him. "Folks that weep happy tears are happy people. Seems like when you're just so fetch-taked happy you can't stand it another minute, it helps a body to cry."

It was at that moment that Liza-Jane appeared from the house, tucked warm and snug into the folds of a Navy-blue coat, it's lining of a brilliant plaid, a lined hood at the back. Her eyes were rapturous, and she moved with the unconscious arrogance of any girl who knows that she is looking her best.

"I don't know how to thank you, Mr. Dexter," she said graciously, but there was a wild excitement in her eyes that shook her voice. "It sure was nice of you. It's the most beautiful thing I ever had in all my life."

"I saw you looking at it in the mail-order catalogue, Liza-Jane," said Dexter. "Your Wish Book as you call it. So I ordered it, feeling safe, because I knew you really wanted it."

"Oh, I did, Mr. Dexter, I did, and I sure thank you!" Liza-Jane breathed, and the way her eyes clung to Dexter's made Granny draw a sharp breath and look more closely at both of them.

Nora restrained her tears, soothing Julie and Jennie-Sue, and sending them into the warm house to play with their dolls, while she turned to inspect Liza-Jane wearing the new coat.

"It's awful pretty, Mr. Dexter," she said hesitantly, "but I don't know if I ought to let you give her anything like that."

Rage replaced the joy in Liza-Jane's eyes, and she cried out harshly, "Oh, don't you? Well, let me tell you something, Nora Anderson, just you try to make me give it back to him. Just you try! He give you and Granny and the young 'uns things, and you got no right to make me refuse his present. So long as he wants to give it to me, what business is it of yours, I'd like to know?"

"Hi, wait a minute, Liza! Hold it! You've got no right to talk to Nora in that tone," said Dexter swiftly, and the warning glance he gave the girl silenced her, so that she turned silently, sulkily away. "Look, Nora, it's what the child wanted more than anything else in the world. Why shouldn't she have it?"

"But it must have cost an awful lot of money, Mr. Dexter," Nora hesitated.

"If that's what's worrying you, Nora, it cost no more than the doll for Julie and the one for Jennie-Sue," Dexter assured her. "Believe me, Nora, I can afford it. You've all been so good and so kind to me, taking me in as if I had been one of the family, that I want to do something to show my appreciation. The child wants the coat as much as Julie and Jennie-Sue want the dolls. You didn't argue about that—."

"No, of course not. If Julie wanted her right arm, Nora would cut it off and give it to her without a whimper," Liza-Jane flashed. "It's just me she don't want to have things. Treating me like a kid, refusing to let me have dates, hating all the boys in the Valley, and determined to make me an old maid like she is. She's afraid some man will see me looking pretty, instead of like something out of a rag-bag as I've always done, and want to marry me."

Dexter made a slight gesture of wry amusement. "If I'd had any idea my friendly gesture was going to precipitate a riot, I'd probably have thought twice before I went shopping," he confessed, and to

Nora added, "If I've offended you in any way, Nora, I'm desperately sorry. I meant nothing by the gifts, except friendliness.'

"I'm knowing that, Mr. Dexter, and I'm sure obliged to you, and of course Liza-Jane can keep the coat. After all, I'm keepin' the sweater, and Granny's keeping her fascinator," said Nora.

Granny bristled. "Keep the fascinator? Well, now just let somebody try to take it away from me. Just let them try! I'll fight them from here to Knob's Gap and back first!"

"Attagirl, Granny!" said Dexter in swift relief, and grinned at them. "And now, Nora, if you're ready, we'll go light my fire."

"You ain't eaten," protested Granny. "We had to, account of the young 'uns, but we kept your dinner hot."

"Thanks, I had lunch at the county seat when I finished my shopping," said Dexter and grimaced at the memory. "And I want Nora to help me get ready for my housewarming—sorry, the play party."

He went back to the car and brought out something the like of which neither Nora nor Granny had ever seen, and explained casually, "It's a charcoal burner. We'll put the live coals in it, and cover it with this lid, and drive like sixty to my house, and start the fire."

"Well, now, I never!" marveled Granny, wide-eyed as coals of fire were shoveled into the contraption. "What will folks think of next?"

Dexter's eyes were twinkling but he said gravely, "I often wonder about that, Mrs. Witham. I often wonder."

"Shucks, you don't have to go on calling me Miz' Witham, Mr. Dexter," said the old lady, drawing her stole about her proudly. "My friends always call me Granny, and I'd be obliged if you would, too."

"Thanks, I appreciate that, Granny. Ready, Nora?" said Dexter, and a moment later he and Nora were driving away, while Granny and Liza-Jane stood watching them. Liza-Jane, with her new coat wrapped smartly about her, her lovely face sullen, her eyes dark with disappointment, burst out, "He never even asked me to go along!"

Granny eyed her curiously. "I don't know that there's any reason why he should," she commented.

Liza-Jane gave her a furious glance, started to speak, and then turned and ran out of the room, while Granny looked after her, a troubled, thoughtful expression on her wizened old face.

DEXTER GLANCED DOWN AT NORA, riding beside him and smiled. "Do you realize this is the first time you and I have been alone since we first met?" he asked her.

"Well, no, sir, I don't reckon I had," she admitted.

"Do me a favor, Nora?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then for Pete's sake stop saying sir to me," said Dexter.

Nora colored, but there was a twinkle in her eyes. "Reckon that'll be hard to do, Mr. Dexter," she confessed. "Us young 'uns was always brought up to say sir and ma'am to folks older than us."

Dexter's jaw tightened. "Do I seem so much older than you, Nora?"

"Oh, no, sir! I didn't mean it like that. It's just that—well, you're a flatlander, Mr. Dexter and—well, I reckon I don't no-wise feel like it would be decent if I wasn't to say sir to you."

"That's silly, Nora! A girl as beautiful as you are doesn't have to be humble before any man, woman or child in the land."

Nora stared at him in utter amazement. "Me, beautiful!" she gasped. "Mr. Dexter, you're funning me!"

"Don't you ever look into a mirror, Nora?"

"Well, sure," she admitted with a gleam of humor. "But I ain't never seen nobody beautiful looking back at me. Liza-Jane's the pretty one. She takes after Maw. Folks that knew Maw before she married Paw says Liza-Jane's the spitting image o' her."

"Liza-Jane is lovely," Dexter conceded and added hastily, "but, of course, she's only a child."

"Reckon she don't think so," Nora sighed, and there was no longer a twinkle in her eyes. "She thinks she's full-grown and ought to be getting married."

"Married? Why she can't be more than fifteen or sixteen!"

"Yes, sir, but up here gals marry early. Maw wasn't no more than sixteen when I was borned."

Dexter nodded and was silent as they drove through the village, and to the narrow road that twisted its way upward to the plateau on which the old Roper house had been built more than a hundred years ago. There was a curious look in his eyes, and Nora had a queer feeling that he had forgotten she was there.

As they came out of the road beside the house, he stopped the car and looked down at her, smiling. "Well, what do you think of it, Nora?" he asked.

Nora looked at the house, wide, low, built of unpeeled logs deeply mortised together, strong, sturdy-looking, facing a magnificent sweep of valley and the mountains beyond the valley.

"It's a right fine house, Mr. Dexter. Reckon it'll be here longer than the old Roper place, and that was built back in 1847," she told him.

He guided her into the house and stood watching her as she looked about. The living-room was the full width and half the depth of the house, and she looked, wide-eyed at its size.

"My sakes, Mr. Dexter, you could hold prayer meeting in this room," she told him.

Dexter laughed, and she did not grasp the derisive amusement in his laugh. "Well, that's not exactly what I had in mind," he admitted. "Though I hope my friends in the Valley will drop in often, and that we'll have some nice meetings here. Amusing and interesting ones, anyway."

He showed her the one small, austere bedroom; the kitchen with its white enameled sink, its water faucets, the hot-water heater. Nora was mostly awed by the stove. It was a new and gleaming four-burner oil stove with a very adequate and usable oven.

"Ain't it wonderful? You just strike a match and put it to a wick, and the fire's lit," she marvelled just above her breath. "No wood to chop, no light wood splinters to split—just a match, is all. I bet you that there oven would turn out a right tasty roast or a mess of fine pies. I'd dearly love to try my hand cooking on that there beautiful stove."

"Be my guest," laughed Dexter. "Any time at all that you feel the urge, come along, Nora. I'll leave the key out for you, and you can make yourself at home."

She looked up, surprised. "The key? You aiming to lock up when you ain't home, Mr. Dexter?" she asked.

Puzzled, he answered, "Well, of course, Nora. Doesn't everybody?"

She laughed at that. "I bet you there ain't a house in the Valley that's even got a lock, much less a key! Oh, I reckon maybe Storekeeper locks up the store, and I reckon Banker Burns locks the bank. There ain't nobody else here got anything worth stealing, even if folks here would steal from one another. If we got anything a neighbor

needs worse than we do, we give it to him. And he does the same fer us."

He stared at her, and shook his head. "Utopia? Or Shangri-La?" he murmured to himself, but since she had not the remotest idea what he meant, she sensibly made no effort to find out.

He showed her the refreshments he had planned for the night's housewarming, and she marveled at the number and the complexity of the sandwiches, the cakes and cookies.

"I was wondering what we'd have to drink, Nora," he suggested when she had praised and approved enthusiastically the viands he displayed. "Fruit punch, maybe? Or something stronger?"

"Reckon bottled pop would please most folks best," she said and added harshly, "unless you wanta see the men folks make hogs of themselves, swilling rot-gut and pop-skull white lightning."

The harshness of her voice, the hard set of her face narrowed his eyes slightly. "I take it you don't approve of liquor, Nora." His tone was lightly teasing.

"I dearly despise it and them that makes hogs of themselves with it."

Dexter smiled, but it was a smile that did not reach to his eyes. As they came back into the enormous living room he said lightly, "Then I'll stop in at the store after I take you home and see how many cases of soda pop Hawkins has on hand. Maybe some cider?"

"If it ain't too hard," she conceded.

She was obviously poised on the verge of flight, and Dexter waved her towards an enormous sofa, made by the mountain craftsmen and covered with a flowered calico that matched the draperies at the windows.

"Sit down, Nora. I've been wanting to talk to you," he urged. "It's taken me long enough to get you to myself, and I'm not going to let you go before I have to."

"I ought to be getting back," she hesitated. "Julie might need me."

Dexter put out his hand and drew her down to the sofa beside him. "That's one of the things I wanted to talk to you about, Nora," he said gently. "What's wrong with Julie? The other children are the picture of health, but Julie seems very frail."

"Doc Barlow doesn't rightly know what ails her," Nora burst out, her voice shaking. "It's about run me crazy, seeing her just fading, in spite of all I can do for her. She don't eat nothing much. She says there ain't nothing paining her. She just ain't hungry. Doc Barlow says if I could get her down to a hospital he knows about in Atlanta

maybe they could find out what ails her and then maybe we could cure her."

"That sounds logical. Why don't you?" asked Dexter.

Her thin-lipped smile was bitter, heart-breaking. "Where'd a body like me get the money?" she asked. "Doc says it would be two, three, maybe five hundred dollars!"

He studied her for a moment before he said quietly, "I'll let you have the money, Nora."

She was stunned by the unexpectedness of that, her eyes wide on his face, her color fading, until her bronzed young face seemed ashen.

"You'd—lend me that much money?" she gasped.

"I wouldn't lend it to you, Nora. I'll give it to you."

He saw her strong, young body shaken by the storm that gripped her, but her eyes did not fall below his gaze. After a long moment, she clenched her hands tightly in her lap.

"I couldn't let you give me the money, Mr. Dexter, and I couldn't even borrow it because I'd never be able to pay it back," she whispered at last, and her voice broke. "I raised my family decent, and I ain't never asked no charity for none of them. I couldn't take charity, not even for Julie."

"It wouldn't be charity, Nora, if you made a return to me," he said, very low.

Her brows drew together in a puzzled frown, and her eyes met his straightly, honest bewilderment in their red-brown depths.

"What kind of talk is that? I told you I couldn't never pay you back. I got nothing to pay you back with," she burst out after a moment.

He bent above her, his face only a few inches from hers, and in his eyes there were strange fires she had never seen there before. He, too, was pale, a small ridge of muscle leaping beside his mouth. "You're not a child, Nora. You're a woman, and I'm a man. Between a man and a woman there is always a possibility of exchange. You have something I want as I've never wanted anything in my life before. I have the money to send Julie to the hospital. You want that. A fair exchange, Nora?"

His hands were upon her, and she shrank from him sickly, loathing and disgust in her eyes. Frustrated and angry, he thrust her away from him and stood up, walking away from her, his hands jammed in his pockets.

"That's the proposition, Nora. Take it or leave it," he snapped.

She huddled there, her face hidden by her hands, while wave

after wave of bitter, sick disgust swirled over her. She was innocent, but not a fool. He was offering her five hundred dollars, Julie's life it might well be, for the same thing she had given Grady Kilburn, without any return whatever. How could she refuse him? Yet how could she accept him?

"There ain't anything in the world I wouldn't do for Julie," she whispered desolately at last. "Not any blessed thing in God's green world."

Dexter turned sharply, and looked down at her, his face dark with passion, his eyes flaming. "Then you'll do it, Nora?" he asked eagerly, and was beside her once more, lifting her rigid body in his arms, holding her tightly, burning kisses on her face, her throat, his hands fumbling avidly at her person. "You won't be sorry, Nora. I'll take care of you. I'll give you everything in the world you want. Beginning with the money for Julie. But you'll come to me here when I want you, Nora? You'll be my girl?"

She tipped her head back, her eyes shut tightly, the tears slipping from beneath the lids, streaking her ashen face with their salt trickle.

He took no notice of her tears. He was aware only of her assent, and he was urging her towards the bedroom before she sensed his meaning and drew sharply back.

"*Now*?" she whispered in sick shock.

"Now!" His voice was harsh and eager. "The sooner you get Julie to the hospital, the sooner she'll be well."

She shrank, but his arms gathered her close and hard against him, and his voice was a crooning murmur that sounded in her ears almost drunk with passion.

"Nora, I'm so damned crazy for you that I can't stand it much longer. I'm out of my mind with wanting you. There were nights, Nora, when I've stood outside your window and watched you get undressed for bed, when it's been all I could do to keep from smashing the window and taking you then and there. You never knew I went for a walk after supper, just so that I could watch you get ready for bed, did you? It was torture, Nora, just torture, but I couldn't keep myself away from the window. You're so—female, Nora! So much a woman! Such a gorgeous armful of woman. I've never known anyone like you. I've known from the first that I'd have to have you, no matter how much it cost me, and now you're here, and Nora, before you leave this house, you are going to belong to me. Make no mistake about that, Nora!"

By now he had drawn her into the bedroom, and he left her for a moment to lock and bar the front door. She stood where he had left her, sick and shaking, terrified as she had never been before in all her life, knowing that now she could not escape him. Whether she did this awful thing in return for money for Julie, or whether she tried to run away, she knew that he would not let her go. What was coming was inescapable, and for Julie, she told herself, she could go through with it.

In a moment he was back. A bubbling scream broke from her lips, but in an instant it was smothered by his eager kiss. She felt that she was borne backward until she fell across the bed, and lay helpless, limp, unable to resist . . .

There was nothing gentle about his manner of taking her. He was like some ravening beast, seeking only its own satisfaction, brutal, demanding, savage. When it was over, she lay bruised and sick, shaken. She had gone through an experience more shameful, more agonizing than anything she had ever dreamed a human creature could endure.

He left her at last, and she heard him moving around in the living room. She forced herself to get up, to adjust her clothes again. She glanced into the mirror above the white-enameled basin in the bathroom and was startled at the face that looked back at her. The face she had seen every day of her life, her own face, was somehow unmarked, untouched by the hideous experience she had just endured. She had a crazy feeling that no one could endure such horror and degradation without something showing in her face. Except that her face was pale and stiff, however, it was unchanged.

She was still standing there, gripping the edge of the wash basin for support, her wide eyes meeting those red-brown ones that gazed back at her from the mirror, when Dexter called to her curtly.

She shuddered and forced herself to walk away from the mirror and back into the living room. Dexter glanced at her and said curtly, "Ready?"

Nora pulled herself to her full height, and her head went up as she held out her hand. "The—money?" she said.

Dexter's expression altered. His smile was thin-lipped, contemptuous. "Oh, you'll get your money," he drawled acidly. "You don't think I keep that kind of change laying around loose, do you?"

Terror bit at her sharply. "You—ain't going back on—what you said?" she stammered.

Dexter grinned cynically. "Of course not. But you surely don't think you're going to get five hundred dollars for just one little hasty session like this, do you? Even the highest-priced call girl doesn't set the figure that high. You be a good girl, and do what I say, and you'll have your money for Julie before you know it."

He turned towards the door, his eyes sweeping her from head to foot, and she felt as though they peeled away her clothing so that she stood before him nude.

"You know something, Nora?" he drawled. "You're quite a girl, or you would be if you could stop fighting so hard and learn to let yourself go. Have fun; enjoy it."

"Enjoy it?" she gasped.

"Lots of women do, Nora. Believe me, I know," he assured her, seeming to take a keen delight in whipping her with his scorn. He was a stranger, terrifyingly clad in Dexter's guise but a million miles removed from the kindly, gentle man she and the children had liked so much. "But I'm a good teacher, Nora. First thing you know, you and I will be having ourselves a hell of a fine time, and Julie will be going down to the hospital and getting well and strong again."

That, of course, was the one thought to which she clung frantically as she huddled beside him and let him drive her back to the old farmhouse.

Chapter Eleven

IT WAS, NORA FELT DESOLATELY, THE LAST STRAW that when she and Dexter drove up the lane, Grady Kilburn's car should be parked there, and that the first person she should see when she stepped out of the car was Grady, standing at the top of the back porch steps.

Grady looked sharply at her white face, and then at Dexter. His eyes hardened, but he answered Dexter's greeting civilly enough.

"Haven't seen much of you lately, Sheriff," drawled Dexter.

"I've been keeping busy," Grady answered coolly.

"So I've heard. Making yourself a bit unpopular with your constituents, aren't you, from what I hear." Dexter smiled, but there was malice and derision in his eyes.

"If you mean I've been breaking up a few stills and putting some of the operators in jail, I'm afraid it isn't making me very popular," said Grady, obviously undisturbed that this should be so. "Not with the 'shiners who are going to jail, but you'd be surprised how grateful their wives and children are."

"Well, I suppose that figures," agreed Dexter as though he had lost interest. "Nora's been helping me get ready for my housewarming tonight. Nice of her, wasn't it?"

"Oh, Nora's a very nice girl, one of the nicest I've ever met or expect to meet," said Grady, and his tone warmed as he looked down at her, smiling. "Afraid you've tired her out, though. She doesn't look as if she'd relish a party very much."

Nora caught her breath, and the last shred of color drained out of her face as her wide, shocked eyes met Grady's. Grady, who had spoken casually, thoughtlessly straightened, and his eyes chilled as they met Dexter's, that were laughing at him.

"I got to see to the milking," said Nora breathlessly and thrust her way up the steps and past Grady who stood aside to let her go, his eyes never leaving Dexter.

When the kitchen door had closed behind Nora, Grady came down the steps and walked wth Dexter towards the two parked cars.

"I don't like you, Dexter," said Grady grimly when they were out of earshot of the house.

Dexter grinned at him insolently. "That practically breaks my heart, Sheriff," he drawled.

Grady was staring at him with cold, steady eyes. "And I'm telling you now that if you bother Nora, I'll damned well blow your brains out," he finished.

"Has Nora complained?" asked Dexter.

"I saw the way she looked just now."

"Oh?"

"She looks like she's been in hell."

"Sheriff, you hurt me deeply! Of course, I know my little home isn't much, just a small place, but I'd hardly call it hell!"

"What the hell are you doing in the Valley, Dexter?"

"Why don't you mind your own business, Sheriff?"

"I've got a hunch I'm doing just that. You don't belong here, Dexter."

Dexter laughed, fished a cigarette out of the package he took from his coat pocket, lit and laughed through the smoke.

"You're being a bit tactless, aren't you, Sheriff? I'm one of the heaviest taxpayers in the Valley, remember? I might be able to do you a little good, come next election. As little as possible, of course."

"Any help you could give me I wouldn't want," said Grady. "I don't like your being here one damned bit. I can't understand what there could be in the Valley that would interest a fellow like you, but you may as well know now that I intend to find out. If it's what I'm beginning to suspect it may be, look out!"

"You terrify me, Sheriff!" Dexter mocked, highly amused.

The two men stood a few inches apart, cold, hard eyes meeting, challenging.

"Come to think of it, Sheriff," drawled Dexter, with a chuckle, "I have a hunch I have more friends in the Valley right this moment than you have. Know what I mean? I don't run around sticking my nose into other people's affairs, and it pays off. You ought to try it some time."

He got into his car, and as he switched on the ignition, he said coolly, "And about the party tonight, be glad to have you drop in, if you care to."

"I intended to," snapped Grady.

"I thought you would. Just wanted you to know you'll be quite welcome, but do me a favor, will you? Leave the handcuffs and the shiny new badge at home. I don't want my guests being made uncomfortable by John Law standing around glooming up the place."

Grady stepped back and watched the car roll down the lane and into the road before he turned and walked back to the house. As he

reached the steps, the kitchen door opened, and Nora, in her working clothes, an old ragged sweater buttoned high against the chill of the late afternoon, came out with her two milk buckets.

She shrank back as she saw Grady, and then she lifted her head proudly and walked down the steps and away from him towards the barn. Grady followed her, and as she reached the barn she turned sharply on him. "You git away from me, Grady Kilburn," she burst out wildly. "Get away from me and leave me be. I hate you and all the men that was ever born on this here earth."

"Does that include Dexter?" asked Grady, and saw the misery and shame flood her face before she turned and ran inside the dim, shadowy old barn.

For a moment Grady hesitated and then, his face set in harsh lines, he followed her. "Look, Nora," he said quietly, "you can't keep running away from me the rest of your life. I can run faster than you can, and you're not going to get rid of me that easily."

She was leaning against the side of the stall where old Bessie waited patiently for her supper and for her milking. Nora's body was limp, and her shoulders were drooping, her face hidden from him.

"I'm so tired," she whispered desolately. "So fetch-taked tired like Granny's always saying. I can't run no more. Seems like I can't even think no more. I'm—plum whipped down."

"Poor darling," said Grady huskily and put out his hand. He saw her shrink from his touch and dropped his hand, clenched into a tight fist, and when he spoke again his voice was gentle, controlled. "Look, Nora, I know I had no right to—do what I did the other night. I didn't mean it to be like that, Nora, but I've been in love with you since the first time I saw you. You're such a wonderful person, Nora. You've done such a fine job with the youngsters, but you've carried burdens too heavy for you too long. I want to help you, darling, that's all. Just to help you. Won't you at least be friends with me? Give me a chance?"

The gentleness of his tone eased something of the agitation that shook her, and Grady waited, his heart in his eyes, not daring to touch her, lest she fly into anger again and pull away from him.

"Friends?" she said at last, her voice very low, far from steady. "Is that all you want of me, Grady Kilburn?"

"All I want for now, Nora," he said and added quickly, "Some day, Nora, I want to marry you. Oh, don't shake your head at me. You don't even know me, Nora. You've never given me a chance to show

you that I can be your friend, and nothing more, until you're ready for more. That's all I ask, Nora—is that you stop hating me, stop fighting me and give me a chance to show you that I can be your friend."

She lifted her head and turned, and in the shadowy old barn he could see that her face was pale and strained, wet with tears.

"Seems like nobody never needed a friend more than I do," she confessed. "Seems like sometimes I just don't know which way to turn. Seems like it would be awful nice to have a friend I could turn to."

"Trust me, Nora, please? Let me be that friend?" he pleaded.

She looked up at him, and her eyes searched his face, his eyes for a long, long moment.

"I want so much to help you carry your burdens, Nora. The youngsters are growing up. You've done a swell job on them, but now they need a man around, Johnny and Bill especially. They're wonderful youngsters, and you don't want them to follow the wrong example. Not that I'm such a prize example, I admit, but at least I can steer the boys right and if I don't set them such a fine example, I can at least warn them against the wrong ones."

"I'd be plum satisfied if they were to be exactly like you, Grady," she admitted in an unaccustomed rush of frankness.

"Hi, that's the nicest thing you ever said to me." Grady was delighted. "We'll start from there, Nora, shall we? Friends from now on?"

As though she saw something in his eyes that still made her slightly uneasy, she murmured hesitantly, "I reckon so."

"If you're worrying about me taking advantage of you again, Nora, you needn't," he told her. "I'm crazy about you, but I don't want you, unless you want me. It isn't any good otherwise. I won't ever try to make love to you again, until I'm sure you want me to. Will you trust me, Nora?"

Color burned in her face, and her head was high. "When I want anybody to make love to me again, it'll be the middle of December and ninety in the shade," she told him.

"That I won't believe," said Grady. "Now sit down there and rest, and give me those buckets. I'll do the milking. And don't try to tell me this is woman's work. Part of my job as sheriff is the attempt to convince these mountain men that there's no disgrace about taking some of the drudgery and hard work off their wives' shoulders."

Nora gave a small, forlorn laugh. "Reckon that's going to make you more unpopular with the folks here abouts than running the 'shiners in," she mocked. Grady's heart lifted at the very small spark of merriment that was briefly in her eyes.

He grinned up at her above twin streams of milk that were spurting, beneath his deft fingers, into the big milk bucket held between his knees. "Oh, haven't you heard? I'm counting on the woman's vote to re-elect me next time," he said. "I figure by the time my present term in office expires the women will realize I am a good friend to have, and they'll vote for me, even if their husbands don't."

"Unless they and their kids get so hungry while their men folks are doing time for 'shining that they ain't able to vote," she said.

"That's been attended to," he told her. "The County Welfare takes care of the wives and dependent children of the men who have been sentenced for moonshining."

Nora's eyes were wide and amazed. "Well, now, I do declare!" she marveled.

Grady glanced at her, his jaw set. "Did you really think I could cart a man off to jail, no matter how guilty he might be, and know his wife and children would starve without him?" he asked. "That proves you don't know me very well, Nora."

"Well, no, I reckon I don't," she admitted

"You and I both know, anyway, Nora, that most of the men who are moonshining leave the farm work to their wives and children, and in most cases having the man locked up in jail or working on the road gang means more peace and comfort than they ever knew when the man was home. Nothing is meaner than a man with a skinful of mountain dew, as you and I both know."

Nora had a flashing, ugly memory of her father, and her jaw hardened. "That we surely do," she said through her teeth.

Grady went back to his milking, and Nora sat watching him, feeling that she was seeing him for the first time, wondering at the peace and the comfort she felt at seeing him there, wondering at the warmth of her heart where hatred for him had melted into an uneasy emotion that was hard for her to understand. It could not be, could it, that she liked him? That she liked a man? The thought startled her, and she watched the smooth rippling of the powerful muscles across his back that stood out against the thin khaki shirt as he milked the cow with accustomed ease.

The turn of his wrists, his profile outlined against old Bessie's

smooth tan-colored flank, the way his dark hair swept carelessly back from his forehead, leaving the tiniest thread of pale skin between his hair-line and the place where the sun-bronze began—it all stirred her. Suddenly, deep within her, she felt an odd, uneasy turbulence that was reminiscent of that episode with him in the hay—submerged until now by the horror of this afternoon when Dexter had approached her with such brutality. Both experiences had been essentially the same, and yet as different as night and day. Both had been men, both had wanted her in the same way, but there had been a tremendous difference in the way they had satisfied their need for her surrender. A world of difference.

It frightened her to realize the trend of her thoughts. Her heart beat so hard it was all she could do to remain there. Everything within her, every instinct bade her rise and flee, but just when she could not deny that instinct for flight any longer, Grady grinned and stood up, lifting the two brimming milk buckets.

"That takes care of that," he said cheerfully and led the way out of the barn, into the thick, chill dusk, completely unaware of the stormy emotion that had almost made Nora forget her promise not to run from him any more.

JULIE CAMF RUNNING TO NORA, the moment Nora stepped into the kitchen, and tears were streaming down the small, pinched face as Nora bent and gathered her close.

"Liza-Jane says I can't go to Mist' Dexter's play party, Nora. I can, too, go, can't I, Nora? Nora, you ain't gonna leave me here all alone like Liza-Jane says, are you Nora?" wailed the child, digging her tear-wet face into Nora's throat.

Nora's arms held her tightly and she looked up at Liza-Jane who stood sulkily in the dining-room doorway.

"How come you said that, Liza-Jane?" demanded Nora.

"Because it's not a party for children," said Liza-Jane.

Granny studied the girl curiously. "It's a play party, ain't it?" she asked.

"It's a housewarming," Liza-Jane flung back. "That's different from a mountain play party. Kids aren't ever expected at housewarmings, Miss Cofer says. And Mr. Dexter is city-folks, and he won't be expecting folks to bring their kids."

"Then I reckon Mr. Dexter's going to be a mite surprised," commented Granny mildly, though her eyes on the girl were sharp and shrewd. "How'd mountain folks go to parties at night, unless they bring their young 'uns?"

"Oh, all right, if you want to be backwoods mountain hicks, go ahead," snapped Liza-Jane and flounced out of the room.

'Can I go, Nora? Can I go?" begged Julie frantically.

"Well, of course, you're going, honey," Nora soothed her and then looked up uneasily at Granny." Of course, it's right cold outside. You reckon she'll catch her death of cold?"

Granny said firmly, "You can wrap her up in my fascinator," and drew the beloved, soft, red woolen scarf from about her shoulders, eyeing it lovingly.

"I've got a better idea," said Grady eagerly. "Granny, if you wouldn't mind riding in the truck?"

Granny stared at him. "Well, sakes aliving," she protested. "It wouldn't be the first time I rode in a truck and was mighty glad to do it instead of walking."

"Then, Nora, you and I will go in my car, with Julie. I've got a

heater in the car, and she'll be snug as a bug in a rug, and you'll need your fascinator, riding in the truck, Granny. Nora and I will bundle Julie up in a blanket."

Granny tucked the scarlet wool snugly about her shoulders, her eyes bright. "Well, now, seems like that just about fixes everything. You taking your guitar, Nora, ain't you?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Dexter don't want me to play at his party," said Nora.

Granny stared, outraged. "Well, I don't know about Mr. Dexter, but you know every blessed soul in the Valley would think something was powerful wrong did you not play your guitar and sing for them. Wouldn't be no party, unless you played them 'Chicken in the Bread Tray, Kickin' out Dough'."

Grady laughed down at Nora. "That's one I want to hear," he told her happily. "I've heard about your guitar-playing and singing, Nora, but I've never happened to hear you actually playing."

"It's just something Paw learned me," said Nora, and her mouth thinned. "Reckon it's about the only thing he ever learned me that I was proud to learn."

"Well, now, you 'uns make haste and get yourselves all washed up for supper so we can get a soon start!" urged Granny.

Later, when the truck, with Johnny at the wheel, had lumbered down the lane, Grady tucked Nora and Julie snugly into the car. He got in beside them, and as he started the car and switched on the heater, he looked down at the child's eager face and beyond her to Nora. "I feel like a family man," he admitted, "and it's a proud and happy feeling. I like your family, Nora."

"I'm thanking you kindly," said Nora, unable to keep the faint quiver from her voice, fearful of saying more, lest she betray something of the warm, sweet unrest in her heart at his words.

Julie chattered eagerly, and the drive seemed very short.

Dexter's house was aglow with light, and there were already cars parked, and a few mule teams hitched to ancient buggies and springless wagons. Voices and laughter could be heard from the house, and as Grady parked the car, Granny and the others loomed up out of the darkness, waiting for them.

"There's a mess of folks here already," said Granny. "Sure is nice to get about once in awhile and see folks like this. You all ready? Then let's go in."

With the scarlet woolen scarf like a flag, Granny marched up the walk to the house, the children trooping behind her. Grady was carry-

ing the still bundled-up Julie, and Nora, with her battered guitar case held in her arms, brought up the rear.

The door opened, letting out a burst of sound and a wave of heat, and Dexter stood there greeting them urbanely. Ushering Granny and the children into the house, his eyes amused, satirical as he saw Grady carrying Julie ,and Nora beside him.

"Well, well, Kilburn, you look more like the head of a large family that John Law himself," he greeted them, and then as he saw the guitar case in Nora's arms he laughed. "Don't tell me you're a musician, Nora. You are indeed a lady of many talents, aren't you?"

There was a hidden sting in the words that brought hot color to Nora's face, but she did not answer him, as they were drawn into the house and surrounded by friends and neighbors.

The party was going strong. As usual, of course, the women were grouped together on one side of the enormous living room, the men on the other, and as Julie joined an eager group of youngsters, Dexter drew Grady and Nora to one side.

"For Heaven's sake," he said under his breath, "set me straight, will you? The party is dying on its feet. How do I get them to mix up? This male-herding to one side, women to the other has me licked."

"Only way you can get men and women to mix at a party, Mr. Dexter, is by starting a square dance," Nora told him, without looking at him.

"A square dance? Then get one started, before the party dies on its feet." He ordered her so brusquely that Grady looked at him sharply, and then down at Nora's pale, set face.

As one obeying an order, Nora stepped to the center of the floor and looked about her. "Where's Dad Elkins an' his fiddle?" she called. "Let's have some music, Dad."

There was a murmur in the group of men, and one of them stepped forward, eyeing Grady with cold hostility. "Reckon you better ask Sheriff, Nora, account of he's the one put Dad in jail," he growled. "Ain't gonna be no square dancing tonight, Nora, not with Dad and Bud Livesy and Jim Sutton in jail at the county seat."

Startled, Nora turned sharply to Grady who nodded grimly.

"Sorry, Nora, but I'm afraid that's the way it is," he said. "Dad and Bud were running an illicit still and peddling the rotgut they were brewing. And Jim was beating his wife."

The angry murmuring among the men deepened, and they drew closer to Grady, surrounding him, while the women drew back

fearfully, and the children, big-eyed and awed by this evidence of trouble among their elders, huddled together.

"Things have come to a pretty pass," one of the men said harshly "when a fellow can't even make himself a little drop of something to keep the cold out of his bones without gitting himself hauled off to jail."

Grady looked around the group, hands in his pockets, cool and unperturbed. "I promised you all, when I asked for your votes, that I'd clean up the Valley, and that's what I intend to do," he stated. His voice was hard, determined.

"Fellow's got him a right to make him a living best way he can," muttered somebody in the group of hostile men.

"Sure. I'm all in favor of that, but I'm not in favor of a man breaking the law," Grady said.

The grumbling in the group became louder.

"Reckon we had about enough of you, Sheriff. How about it, boys?" A voice rose above the angry growling, and the group closed in on Grady, urging him towards the door.

SUDDENLY Nora was there in the group, standing beside Grady, her head held high, and Grady looked down at her startled.

"Whereabouts is Maw Elkins?" Nora called.

A thin, tired little woman moved uneasily. "Here I be, Nora," she said quietly.

"Maw, how do you feel about Dad being locked up?" demanded Nora.

The women murmured now, rustling uneasily like a group of barnyard fowl suddenly disturbed by the appearance of a hawk. The thin little woman looked uneasilly about the group, and then at Nora and Grady where they stood with the hostile men hemming them in.

"Well, now, Nora, reckon I might as well tell the truth," she blurted. "It's the first time since me and Dad's been married I can get a full night's sleep in my bed without being scared he'll come home and whip hell out of me and the young 'uns because of him having a skinful of that pop-skull."

There was an instant of startled, shocked silence from the men; a rustling murmur among the women, and suddenly Maw Elkins no longer stood alone in front of the group of women. Another woman who might, for looks, have been almost her twin, had joined her, and with her head held high, spots of color in her thin, brown face she looked over the group of men with loathing and contempt.

"Me and you both, Mattie," she said clearly. "Bud's a right good man when he ain't liquored. Leastways, he used to be. It's been so long since I seen him when he wasn't reeling drunk, reckon I sort of don't remember the way he used to be. I'm thanking Sheriff for locking him up. I'm hoping he'll keep him locked up till he gets some sense."

The men were so startled, so dumbfounded by this sudden frankness from their heretofore subjugated women that not one of them could speak. They could only stand, staring, with dropped jaws.

"Whereabouts is Nettie Sutton?" asked Nora.

"She's at the hospital at the County seat where Sheriff took her same time he took Jim to jail," said Mattie hotly. "Broke her arm, and kicked her in the side, and she's got maybe a brain concussion. Leastways, that's what Doc Barlow says."

Nora's eyes were flaming with fury as she addressed the other women. "Well, you all have heard. What are we going to do about it?" she demanded.

There was that uneasy, frightened rustling again, and a woman muttered, "What can we do about it? We're married to them."

"That doesn't mean they have the right to kick you around and mistreat you and your children," said Grady.

"You shut that blabber-mouth of yours, Sheriff. You've talked too damned much already," howled an irate man in the crowd.

Nora turned on him furiously, her eyes blazing, and her fury was so hot that the group gave back a little before them. "He may have talked too much," she flamed, "but I ain't. I ain't even got started yet. It's high time us women folk in the Valley started standing up for ourselves and not taking no more abuse from you men brutes."

The men bristled, yet they were so stunned by the incredible fact that a mere woman had dared raise her voice against them, that they were speechless to protest further than by angry growls.

"Now, you look here, Nora Anderson, you ain't got no right to talk so," snarled a man well back in the group, who saw to it that he stayed well-concealed back there. "It ain't fit for an old maid to go yapping about something she don't know nothing about."

"Come out from behind there, Jabez Lowery," snapped Nora. "I see ye back there, and I'd know that whiny voice of yours in the biggest crowd and the darkest night. Sure, I'm an old maid, and I'm aiming to go on being an old maid because I'm smart! I see what my Maw went through. Ain't anyone of you don't know about that. But she wasn't different than the other women here. Ain't any married woman in this here room don't know what devilment a man full of liquor can think up.

"It's the women that does the work. The men loaf, and get drunk, and raise hell. There ain't a woman in this room that doesn't know what it means to have the spring plowing to do, raising the young 'uns, keeping them fed as well as she can with you good-for-nothing scallywags dragging off all the corn to make liquor, not caring if the young 'uns get fed or not. And coming home, roaring drunk, and whipping the young 'uns and your women. Every last one of you ought to be beaten till you'd eat off the mantel shelf for a month!"

Before any of them could recover from the blazing barrage of her anger, she turned to the women who were eyeing her fearfully, but with rising excitement.

"Us women don't have to put up with this no longer," she told them. "Things are going to be different from now on here in the Valley. Other places, men behaves themselves. We can make them do it here. All we got to do is join up together, make us a kind of club, and help each other out. Any time a fellow comes reeling home, wanting to start whipping somebody, give it to him. If he's drunk, you're a heap stronger than he is. If you can't handle him with your fists, pick up a piece of stovewood and beat his brains out. First time one of these here hell-raising men gits a stick of stove-wood alongside his head, it'll wake him up—and be an example to the others. Are you with me, women?"

There was a confused babble of rising excitement, of enthusiastic assent, to which the men listened with mounting horror and uneasiness.

"Now, you look here, Nora Anderson—," one of them protested self-righteously. "You aiming to create violence that'll tear this here Valley plum to pieces?"

Nora smiled at him, flushed and bright-eyed. "Why, no, Eben, there ain't going to be no violence," she said sweetly. "Not so long as all you fellers walk a chalk-line, there ain't."

Eben said grimly, "Well, I'm warning you all here and now, any time my woman gets uppity with me, I'm gonna—."

A tall, heavily-built woman forced her way to the center of the room, and stood eyeing the man, her hands on her hips. "You're gonna what, Eben?" she asked him gently.

Eben quailed beneath her gaze, and said hastily, "I'm gonna show her who's boss."

His wife grinned at him, with a flash of the gold tooth she was so proud of. "Ain't no cause you to do that, Eben, honey," she drawled, and her tone started a spurt of smothered laughter among the men. "I know who's boss, and I reckon you do, too. I ain't got no cause to join up with this here woman's club for my own self. I can handle you any old time I want to. I'm joining to help the pindlin', scared ones that's afraid of their men."

Eben withdrew into the group, scarlet with shame, knowing the derision in the eyes of his friends, but not daring to assert himself further.

His wife turned coolly to Nora. "Well, looks like we got a start," she said. "And I'm telling all of you women right here and now. This here is a club that's aimed to help each and every one. In case you're

too scared to try to handle your own man, does he come home hell-raising, we got to get together and show him a thing er two. Maybe a little taste of the strap might do him some good."

There was an eager, excited murmur of approval, and Grady, very sober but for the twinkle in his eyes, raised his hand. "Just a minute, ladies," he protested. "Let's not have any mob violence. All you have to do is appeal to the law, in case of any trouble. I intend to see the Valley is cleaned up and kept clean, but you mustn't take the law into your own hands."

"How come not?" demanded Mrs. Eben. "If they're our own men folks, and they want to fight, how come we can't hit back? They feel like their women folks are theirs just the same as their live stock. They claim they got a right to whip a mule to death if they want to, long as it's their mule. But they'd a lot more likely beat a wife, because a mule costs money, and a wife don't."

"Just the same, the law is here to protect you," began Grady.

Mrs. Eben's smile was friendly, lightly amused as though he was a child. "Reckon we can tend to it, Sheriff, but we're obliged to you for what you've done," she said, and turned back to the group of women, who drew close together, their voices buzzing eagerly.

Dexter looked down at Nora, and said dryly, "That was quite a performance, Nora. You not only ruined my party, but you've probably sowed seeds of violence that'll create a hell of a lot of trouble."

"It was way past time when the women here in the Valley rose up and stopped the way the men folks are acting," she said. "We're aiming to stop the violence they've been guilty of all these years."

"You think this will stop it? Nora, don't be a fool! These men aren't going to take this lying down. Have you forgotten that each one of these women will go home after this, with her own husband, and that he will promptly assert himself to destroy any rebellion she might think, with her friends around here, that she could offer? You haven't helped them, Nora. You've only made things tougher for them. You and your bat-eared boy friend."

Nora looked up at him sharply. "My—boy friend?" she stammered.

"Don't give me the wide-eyed, innocent routine, Nora. I meant the stalwart Sheriff, of course. It's obvious you're crazy about him, and that you staged all this revolt of the females to save him from a roughing up by the men whose friends he arrested."

"I ain't crazy about him nor no man ever lived," she flashed.

"Don't be a fool, nor take me for one," snapped Dexter. "You think I haven't been here long enough to know that no respectable woman, according to the Valley's quaint standards, ever lifts her voice in the presence of the lordly male? Especially not to call him the things you called these men tonight. They don't love you for it, Nora, and they're not going to take it lying down."

He glanced at Grady, standing talking to a group of the women while the men milled angrily about, muttering, casting angry looks at the young sheriff.

"You think you've helped him, Nora," Dexter went on. "You haven't. You've made him the target for a bullet some dark night, and I wouldn't be too surprised if one of them took aim at you, too. You haven't endeared yourself, nor your boy friend, to your friends and neighbors, my dear girl."

Nora looked up at him fearfully, and then across at Grady, who met her eyes and came quietly to stand beside her.

"Granny thinks we'd better get the kids home to bed, Nora," he said, his eyes holding Dexter's with a cool hostility. "It's beginning to snow."

"Yeah, we'd best be going," Nora agreed and hurried towards the group of children.

"I hope you know what you two have done tonight, Kilburn." Dexter's tone was biting.

"Of course. We've started a new regime in Pilcher's Valley, Dexter. Just see you don't get in our way," said Grady coolly and turned away.

Chapter Fourteen

WHEN THEY WERE IN THE CAR, Julie heavy with sleep, bundled snugly in her blanket, following the wobbling tail-light of the truck as it swung off towards home, Nora looked up at Grady uneasily.

"You reckon they'll be trouble, Grady?" she asked.

"I imagine so," said Grady cheerfully. "Don't you? But something good will come out of it."

"Mr. Dexter says folks'll maybe start shooting at you."

"Oh, Dexter's an alarmist," said Grady and chuckled. "Besides, he doesn't know the mountain men. They talk big, when they're all together in a group. They can be bullies and tyrants when they're alone with helpless women and children, but not one of them has the guts to start anything with another man, or the law. You did a wonderful thing tonight, Nora. And—thanks for coming to my side in the fight."

"Me and you believe in the same things, Grady. How come I wouldn't be on your side?" she reasoned.

"Just stay there, will you, Nora?" he asked.

"Well, sure. Only take care of yourself, Grady. Some of these men can be poison-mean," she reminded him.

Grady nodded. "Sure, I know. Funny, there are some of the most decent, honest, straight-forward fellows I've ever met right here in the Valley, men whose friendship anybody would be proud to claim. Out of all the Valley, there aren't over a dozen or fifteen men that aren't good citizens, that treat their women folk decently and live up to their every responsibility. It's that dozen or fifteen I'm after, Nora. Once we get them straightened out, the Valley's going to be a fine place to live in."

"Yeah, I know," Nora agreed, "but them dozen can sure stir up ruckuses."

"We'll just have to stop them then." Grady grinned down at her as the car followed the truck up the lane and stopped.

Granny had left a lighted lamp on the kitchen table. They all trooped into the house, and Grady built up the fire in the kitchen stove, while Granny brought out a big pitcher of milk, and cookies and a cake.

"Ain't much use of going to bed this time of night." She explained

her actions briskly. "Law me, look at that clock. Half-past midnight already! I ain't been up this late unless I was setting up with the sick, or a corpse, in I don't know when."

"I'd better get moving along," Grady began, but Granny stopped him instantly.

"Grady Kilburn, you ain't gonna move one step out of this house till daylight comes," she hold him. "Way them men were milling around like a lot of cattle stepping in a hornets' nest, ain't no telling what one of them might take it into his head to do. They may be awaiting for you to come along the dark road so they could peel you off with a mess of bullets. No, sir, you're staying right here tonight in the spare room."

"Of course, Grady, that'll be best," said Nora eagerly.

"Thanks, that's swell," said Grady and looked down at Granny, a mocking light in his eyes. "Only I don't want you to think I'm scared!"

Granny chuckled dryly. "I always give you sense enough to know when it's a good time to be afraid, boy," she assured him. "This here is as good a time as any."

"Thanks. I'm glad you think I've got good sense, even if I have to prove it by behaving like a coward."

"We need you here, boy. We ain't going to take no chance of you getting your head blowed off, not till we get the Valley all clean and decent for honest folks," Granny told him firmly and turned to Nora. "Reckon maybe it's a good thing you want to be an old maid, Nora. Reckon you've ruined your chances of being anything else, after what you done tonight."

Grady's eyes on Nora were ardent, and his smile was a caress. "Oh, I wouldn't be too sure about that, Granny," he drawled.

Nora could not meet that fire in his eyes, though it brought color to her cheeks, as she excused herself hastily to put Julie to bed.

Granny studied Grady shrewdly when the girl had gone from the room. "That's a mighty fine gal, Grady Kilburn," she said. "They don't come much better."

"You'll get no argument out of me on that score, Granny," he assured her.

"I wouldn't want her to get hurt," said Granny.

"Neither would I, Granny."

There was a brief silence, and then Granny said, apparently at random, "Of course, reckon there ain't many men would want to marry-up with a gal that's got a mess of young 'uns to raise."

"Any man lucky enough to get Nora to consent to marry him would just consider the children an extra bonus. They're good kids."

"Yeah, I reckon so. But that Liza-Jane, now. She's a handful if ever there was one."

"She's just young, Granny, and feeling her oats," grinned Grady.

Granny eyed him sharply. "Looks to me like she kind of favored that there Mr. Dexter," she said softly.

Grady's eyebrows went up. "Oh, come now, Granny, she's only a kid, and Dexter must be thirty-five, if he's a day."

Granny gave an exasperated sigh. "I do declare, if men ain't the biggest fools!" she exploded. "You think him being thirty-five years old's going to keep him from noticing a gal Liza-Jane's age? Liza-Jane's marrying age, and don't you forget, because she ain't going to."

"Dexter's not a marrying man, Granny!"

"I reckon he ain't. Fact is, don't none of us know enough about Mr. Dexter to judge rightly."

"No," Grady agreed thoughtfully, his brows furrowed in a frown that was puzzled. "We don't know anything at all about him."

Granny said softly, "I hear tell he spent more than a thousand dollars on that place of his. Now, how come a feller would want to come way up here into the mountains and spend that kind of money? Him being a city-fellow and all."

"That," stated Grady, "is the big question. And believe me, Granny, I intend to find out the answer.

"Well, now don't you be doing nothing foolish, Grady Kilburn, and maybe getting a bullet in your insides. Us folks up here, especially the women folks, needs you. To say nothing of Nora needing you," Granny said.

"The one hope in my life, Granny, is that Nora will need me, and that she'll admit it," said Grady earnestly.

Granny's eyes twinkled. "Well, it may take a heap of time for her to admit it, her hating men folks like she does, but she knows now that she's needing you the worst way. So don't you lose heart, boy."

Grady grinned at her warmly. "Thanks, Granny," he said and stood up as Nora came back into the room. "Get the youngsters all tucked up in bed?"

"I don't know if she'll go to sleep for a spell, her being so much in a swivet about the party," said Nora and smiled shy thanks at him for the chair he drew out for her.

Granny studied them both for a moment, and then she sighed.

"Law, me, I'm sure going to miss you folks," she said sadly. "But reckon now you ain't needing me no more, I'd best be getting along home."

Nora turned to her eagerly. "Granny, how come you can't stay out the winter?" she urged. "It'll be a sight warmer for you down here, and we'll be plum proud and happy if you'd just stay on. Seems like I got to where I depend on you so much, I just don't know what I'm going to do without you. Granny, can't you stay? We need you bad."

The brightness of Granny's eyes was misted with tears, and her smile was tremulous. "Reckon that's about the kindest thing a body could ever say to a wore-out, whipped-down old woman like me, Nora, honey," she said gently. "Ain't nothing in God's green earth that's a worse feeling than that you ain't needed no more. Looks like a woman ain't much of a woman unless somebody needs her."

Nora's eyes were bright and eager. "Then you'll stay, Granny? I'm obliged to you!"

"It's me that's obliged to you, Nora, honey, for wanting me. I'd be plum proud to stay. And I'm thanking you for asking me to."

Nora, touched deeply by the older woman's gratitude, put her arms about Granny and kissed her wrinkled cheek.

Grady let out his breath in a sound of deep relief and grinned happily at them. "Now that takes a real load off my mind," he admitted. "I hated to think of Nora here alone, with just the youngsters, while all this revolution among the women folks is going on up here. But with you here, Granny, I guess I can relax a bit."

Nora stiffened, and a chill crept into her eyes. "Reckon you ain't got no cause to be worried about me, Grady Kilburn," she said curtly. "Reckon I been doing all right for a right smart spell, just me and the young 'uns up here."

"That, my girl, was before you made yourself some enemies among the more lawless element," stated Grady. "And because you were taking up for me, helping to fight my battles, I feel responsible for any danger you may have let yourself in for."

Granny was watching them both, her old eyes twinkling.

"I wasn't taking up for you, Grady Kilburn. I was taking up for the women folks who've been kicked around long enough," Nora told him.

Grady looked down at her for a long moment, and though her eyes met his straightly, and her head was still high, there were small fans of color in her cheeks.

"Still fighting me, Nora?" he asked softly.

"You're a man, ain't you? Then I'm fighting you," snapped Nora.

Grady's jaw set hard, and there was a glint in his eyes as he studied her. Neither seemed inclined to soften, and Granny stood up, saying briskly, "Time we was all getting us some sleep before we start clawing and snapping at each other like a bob-cat. Grady, you know where the spare room is. Nora, let's clean up these dirty dishes before we go to bed."

Nora stood up and began clearing away the milk and the plate of cookies, and as Grady passed Granny, the old woman muttered under her breath, "Don't give up now, boy. You got her on the run."

Grady, his jaw set hard, answered curtly, "Give up? I've just begun to fight. It'll be quite a fight, but it'll be worth it."

He walked out, and Granny chuckled as she saw Nora's eyes follow him with a faint softening, a little of the rigidity gone from her face. A trace of glint in her lovely eyes.

Chapter Fifteen

FOR A FEW DAYS there was a perceptible tension throughout the Valley, and echoes of it reached Nora and Granny, busy with the winter chores of hog-killing, and smoking and preserving the meat in various ways.

On a bitterly cold morning, when it was obvious that winter had come to stay for several months, Granny and Nora were busy in the big, warm, odorous kitchen. Granny was rendering lard from the hog-fat, while Nora was making "souse-meat." Julie was seated on a thick rug in a corner out of the way of the two hurrying, busy women, playing with her cherished doll and a kitten.

Neither woman heard the sound of the car in the drive, both absorbed in their work, until footsteps came across the porch, and the door opened, to admit Doc Barlow.

There were eager greetings. Granny poured him a cup of strong, hot black coffee and put a plate of doughnuts in front of him, while he answered their eager questions about current news in the Valley.

"I heard from the hospital in Atlanta, Nora," said Doc quietly as he stirred two heaping spoonfuls of sugar into his coffee. "They'll accept Julie as a patient, if she is there at ten-thirty, Saturday morning."

Nora caught her breath in excitment and joy, but Doc went on heavily, "She'll have to be a pay patient, though. They have no room for awhile, at least, for any more charity patients."

"But that's all right, Doc," cried Nora eagerly. "I never wanted her to be no charity patient. I got the money for her."

Her voice died, as both Granny and Doc Barlow stared at her in astonishment.

"That is, I got the money Mr. Dexter paid me for his room and board," she stammered, scarlet, not quite meeting their eyes.

"Which is about fifty dollars, isn't it?" probed Doc.

"Almost sixty," Nora told him defiantly. "But I can get the rest."

"Where from, Nora? Who from?" demanded Doc.

Nora stood before them, her back against the table, her hands outflung on either side, as though seeking extra support, as she faced them, her face scarlet, her eyes defiant. "Reckon that's my business, Doc," she told him through her teeth.

For a long moment Doc Barlow sat quietly watching her, and Granny put her hand to her shaking old mouth, her eyes dark and frightened as she saw the expression on the girl's face.

"I reckon it is at that, Nora," said Doc at last, his tone quiet, but not quite able to conceal the hurt he felt. "I didn't mean to pry into your affairs, Nora. It's just that I brought you into the world, and I've always felt a great pride and affection for you. I've been as worried about Julie as you have. More, in a way, because I have been so helpless to do anything for her now, at a time when her doctor should be the one peoson she can count on. But you're a grown woman, Nora, and I suppose you know what you're doing."

He stood up and started towards the door, and Nora cried out sharply, "Oh, Doc, I ain't meaning to hurt your feelings none. It's just that—well, I reckon I can't tell nobody. But if you'll just tell the hospital folks that me and Julie will be there Saturday morning, I'll be obliged to you."

Doc Barlow nodded without turning his head, went out of the room, and the door closed behind him.

Nora stood tall and straight and tense, while Granny watched her uneasily. Then Nora turned and said, "Reckon I got to go to the village, Granny. Can you finish without me?"

"Reckon I can," said Granny dryly. "I was making souse-meat before you was born."

When Nora came back from her room, wearing her one good dress and huddled in the ancient dark coat that had belonged to her mother, Granny was still standing at the kitchen table, and as Nora reached the door, Granny spoke quietly.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Nora."

Nora turned sharply, and her eyes fell on the playing child, and then rose to meet Granny's stern gaze. Nora's face was hard and set, her eyes cold.

"I know what I'm doing, Granny, that you can be sure," she said through her teeth, and went out into the biting cold.

She had difficulty in getting the old truck started, but at last the motor coughed and caught. She sent it rolling down the lane, her hands clenched so tightly on the wheel that she was scarcely conscious of the cold that bit through her ragged woolen gloves.

Ordinarily, when she drove through the village, people would wave and call to her. This morning, however, the street was practically deserted, and those who were out merely glanced at her and away.

They were still angry with her, she knew, for the way she had set the women against their husbands at Dexter's play party, but she did not care about anything this morning but getting the money that Dexter had promised her, so that Julie could go to the hospital.

She was stiff with cold when she parked the old truck in front of Dexter's house, and the thick column of smoke rising from the fat fieldstone chimney looked very good to her. She crossed the yard, and as she raised her hand to knock at the door, it swung open. Dexter stood there, wearing a robe over his pajamas.

"Well, well, if it isn't the crusading lady," he drawled, and added, "Well come in, come in before the house freezes. A hell of a morning isn't it?"

"I reckon winter's set in," she agreed and then burst out eagerly as she came into the house and Dexter closed the door, "I come to get the money, Mr. Dexter. Julie's going to the hospital down in Atlanta." Her voice trembled as she spoke.

Dexter eyed her sourly. "Well, hurray for Julie," he mocked. "What money are you talking about, Nora?"

He seated himself before the huge fire of blazing logs, and lit a cigarette, yawning widely, running his fingers through his touseled hair and saying, "Make it simple, Nora. I'm pretty well hung over this morning."

Nora stood staring at him wide-eyed, incredulous. "The money you said you'd give me for Julie to go to the hospital, Mr. Dexter. Don't you remember?" She steadied her voice with an effort against the desperate pleading that clogged her throat.

Dexter frowned, winced as though the slight change of expression deepened his headache and studied her with mocking amusement. "I promised you money, Nora?" he seemed elaborately surprised. "I thought I paid my board bill in full before I left your charming home."

"You know I ain't meaning that." She tried to deny the stunnel feeling that was creeping over her at his behavior. "I'm meaning the money you promised me before the play party if I'd—. Well, I did, Mr. Dexter, and you said you'd give me the money."

Dexter smiled. "Afraid I'm hung-over wore than I thought, Nora," he mocked her, relishing her abject manner. "What was it you were to do for the money?"

"You know, Mr. Dexter. It ain't no use me putting words to it. You know what you asked me to do, and I done it, because I'd do anything in the world fer Julie." She forced the words out standing

there rigid, her wide sick eyes on his face. "And you said you'd give me the money—."

"Funny, I don't seem to recall anything like that," he drawled. "How much money was it, by the way?"

"Five hundred dollars." She spoke the words faintly with awe.

Dexter's eyebrows went up, and now he was genuinely amused, obviously enjoying her misery. "That's a lot of money, Nora. A hell of a lot of money," he drawled. "What were you supposed to do for that much money? Surely you don't think that rather dull session in the bedroom was worth any such reward?"

She was clinging to the back of a chair for support, her shaking knees threatening to let her fall. Her work-roughened hands were blue with cold, and the knuckles showed white with the force of her grip. "You—promised—." Her voice died before the task of getting the words out.

Dexter made a gesture of dismissal with the hand that held the cigarette, and his eyes traveled over her, in the old, worn coat, the bright scarf tied about her head, and his lip curled with fastidious disdain.

"Nora, you really are a fool," he mocked hre. "Five hundred dollars for an hour or two in my bed? You're fantastic! Why, the highest-priced call girl in the business would do a much better job than you did and be tickled to death with half that amount."

Through the fog that dazed her senses Nora managed to stammer, "You ain't—going to give it to me?"

"I certainly 'ain't'!" he mimicked her dialect shortly. "Matter of fact, Nora, five dollars would be rank over-payment for what you offered. To be brutally frank about it, Nora, you were a hell of a disappointment. I suppose it's the fault of this cock-eyed upbringing forced on the women by your men folks, the theory that sexual satisfaction is for men only, and that decent women endure it as an inescapable part of marriage, but no nice woman enjoys it."

The words seemed to fly around her head, stinging as a flight of angry bees, but she was conscious only of one inescapable fact. She had surrendered herself to him in vain. She had endured shame and degradation for Julie's sake, and she had lost.

"You—promised," she whispered, white-lipped, lost to hope. "You promised me the money!"

"Of course. Any man will promise anything until he gets what he wants. A smart girl collects beforehand, not afterwards," Dexter

told her, and added venomously, "Even if you'd been the best damned lover in the world, Nora, after what you did at the housewarming, I wouldn't give you one damned dime. You just about wrecked all that I'd planned. You know how many men were here last night for a nice, friendly little poker-party? Four! I won eight dollars, and they ate and drank twelve dollars worth of food and liquor. Then you come along, demanding five hundred dollars!"

Nora retreated from his viciousness, until her back was against the door. As he still came on, his face ugly and twisted with fury, she fumbled the door open and ran from him, stumbling, until she reached the truck. Before she climbed into the seat, she had heard the door of the house slam shut behind her.

She sat behind the wheel, her body bowed forward, her face in her hands, warm tears slipping down her cheeks. It was the most desolate moment of a life that had been no stranger to desolate moments. It was a moment in which she plumbed the very depths of despair. She had made the sacrifice of her modesty, her decency, her self-respect for Julie. She had made it gladly, in a sence, fiercely proud that her body could sacrifice itself for Julie. Now she found that the sacrifice had been in vain, that she had surrendered woman's most cherished possession and all for nothing. In the bleak desolation of that realization, she had no thought to give the surrender she had made to Grady. Somehow, even in her dazed bewilderment and pain that was something completely different from what she experienced with Dexter.

She sat until the cold had driven into her very bones before she managed to get the old truck started. Driving back through the village, she suddenly pulled the truck to a stop in front of the General Store. She would take Julie a poke of candy, and Granny dearly loved a box of snuff. She had stinted and denied them all so that the small fund for Julie could be kept intact, but now there was no longer any need for that.

She opened the door into the store, and the half-dozen men who stood or sat about the old stove turned their heads towards her, and then away without so much as a word of greeting. Their faces were implacable with hatred, their very backs stiff with it.

Storekeeper came to meet her, smiling at her pleasantly, attending to her small order, and when he had completed it, he walked with her to the door and lowered his voice. "Don't pay no mind to them fellows, Nora," he said softly.

"Them shiftless no-account skunks? How come I'd pay them any mind?" She said it clearly enough for her contemptuous words to reach the straining ears of the men, and she heard a low growl of anger. "If they were any good they'd be home helping their women with the hog-killing and getting wood in for the winter."

"Now, Nora," urged Storekeeper and walked with her out into the cold morning, his kind eyes anxious. "You done enough stirring trouble around here, Nora. Best thing you can do is keep your mouth shut around them fellows. They're mad enough at you now to start trouble."

"Let them," snapped Nora. "Ain't anyone of them I'm scared of."

"Hush, Nora. Careful, child."

"I ain't going to hush—not for the likes of them."

Storekeeper shrugged and watched her as she climbed into the truck and started it. He was still standing there when the truck bounced out of sight along the road that led home.

Chapter Sixteen

GRANNY CAME TO THE DOOR to meet Nora, but one look at Nora's taut white face stopped any eager question that might have risen to Granny's lips.

"I brought you something," said Nora and dropped the can of snuff into the eager old hand." And I brought Julie a poke of candy."

"You reckon she ought to eat candy?" protested Granny.

"What difference does it make? She ain't ever going to be well nohow. She might as well have a little something she'll enjoy, seems like." Nora broke away from the old woman and put the small striped sack of candy in Julie's eager, grimy little hands.

When Nora came back from her room where she had changed the old coat and her pathetic best dress for her accustomed limp calico, Granny was patting the last of the "souse-meat" neatly into a flat pan, preparatory to setting it outdoors to jell.

"You didn' get the money from Dexter, did you, Nora?" she asked quietly.

Nora gasped, and her head went up. "How'd you know—?" she began, but Granny's gesture silenced her.

"Ain't nobody else you could have thought you'd get it from," she said. "You're owing the mortgage on the house and land, and you sold Old Bessie's calf, and we butchered the bull yearling and the hogs. Who else would you think would loan you any money? Only he wouldn't."

"No," said Nora huskily. "He wouldn't."

Granny finished molding the meat to her satisfaction and went out on the porch with it, setting the pan neatly with a row of others, tying a clean milk cloth neatly over it, before she came back into the house, and faced Nora.

"Any reason how come he should have given it to you, Nora?" she asked.

Nora caught her breath, and her eyes flew wide. Color poured in a great tide to her face, and for a moment she could not take her eyes from Granny's probing gaze.

"No, of course not. No reason, except he likes Julie, and—well I reckon maybe I just thought his being rich and all—," she stammered. "That's all."

Granny put a gentle old hand on her arm, and Nora's stammering died to an angonized silence. "You know your own business best, I reckon, Nora," she said. "Reckon us women do what we feel like we got to do, and if it shames the devil, well, I reckon it won't be the first time the old feller's been shamed."

"Granny, I did it for Julie," Nora whispered in an agony of shame.

"Of course you did, honey. Of course you did. Think I don't know that nothing in God's green earth would have made ye do a thing like that unless it was for somebody else? Reckon you'd just about cut the heart out of your body if you could, for Julie," said the old woman quietly, and there was no hint of censure in her voice.

"But he wouldn't give me the money, Granny. Damm his dirty soul to hell!" Nora's voice was deep, and rough and shaken, and Granny's eyes sparked with fire.

"Now, you hush that kind of talk, Nora Anderson! You hush it right this minute! Saying bad words about him ain't going to hurt him none, but it'll hurt you! A heartful of hate purely poisons a body," said Granny.

"I'll hate him the longest day ever I live," Nora said.

"Well, I reckon that's the way any woman would feel," Granny told her. "I'm real sorry, Nora. Real sorry."

"Yes ma'am," Nora said, and turned to the door. "I got to get to work."

As she went through her busy, hard-working day, the clinging slime of shame hung about her. More corroding even than the shame of Dexter's contemptuous dismissal was the realization that Julie was not to have her chance for health, perhaps for life itself.

The family was at supper when a car came into the lane, and a moment later, Grady came into tht kitchen, grinning widely.

"Well, now, Grady Kilburn, what's got you grinning a grin that buttons in the back?" demanded Granny before anyone else could speak.

"Doc Barlow won't be able to drive you and Julie to Atlanta, Nora, so he said I could substitute for him," Grady beamed. "One of the Patterson kids has a bad throat. Doc's scared it may be diphtheria, and he doesn't dare leave. So I'm going to have the privilege of driving you and Julie down."

Nora's white face twisted with bitterness. "Reckon ain't nobody going to Atlanta, Grady, but I'm thanking you for the offer," she said. "It's right kind of you."

Grady stared at her in amazement. "Hi, what is this? After Doc Barlow worked so hard and so long to get things arranged for Julie to go into the hospital, don't tell me you've changed your mind about letting her go," he protested.

"I ain't got the money," Nora told him flatly.

"Oh, if that's all–." Grady's smile was warm and tender. "I didn't think you would have, Nora, that's why I got it for you."

Nora stared at him in amazement, while Granny peered sharply up at him in the yellow lamplight. The children looked puzzled and curious.

"You got the money?" stammered Nora. "But where'd you get it?"

Grady laughed. "Don't be nosey!" he countered, obviously in tremendously high spirits. "It's a man's job to provide the money for his family, and the woman's job not to ask questions. I've got it, and you and Julie and I are leaving here at noon on Friday. Doc thinks it would be best if Julie was in the hospital Friday night. Give her a chance to get over the strain of the drive and the excitement and also the doctors can give her a thorough going-over."

"I–I can't let you–," Nora stammered.

Grady's jaw hardened. "You can't very well stop me," he told her. "Because Julie's going to have her chance, and if you try to stop me, I'll kidnap her and take her along by myself."

For a long moment his eyes held hers, and because of what she saw in them, color poured into her face. After a moment she turned away. A confused babble of questions broke out from the children. Granny set a plate for Grady and insisted he sit down to supper. Grady's eyes followed Nora as she moved about, bringing him food hot from the stove.

It was not until supper was over, and the children had settled down with their home work that Grady and Nora were alone. She faced him then, her hands clenched tightly together across her stomach, her head tilted back.

"I'm right obliged to you, Grady," she said, tears swimming in her eyes. "But it don't seem noways right to let you spend your money on Julie."

Grady asked levelly, "Has anybody a better right?"

Nora caught her breath on a small, soundless gasp, and her eyes evaded his. "I don't know that you got the right, come to think of it," she said.

"Oh, yes, I have," Grady told her. "Because one of these days, Nora,

you're going to marry me. Julie will be my child, as much as she is yours."

"That ain't going to happen! Not never!"

"Never's a long time Nora," said Grady. "Anyway, we're not going to talk about it now. All we're going to talk about now is getting Julie well and strong. You and I can fight our battles later on. But you may as well know now, as later, Nora, that I'm never giving up. Not until I see you married to somebody else."

"That you ain't never going to see," she said through her teeth.

Grady smiled at her tautly, his eyes steady. "No, I don't think so either," he admitted. "When you get over this cock-eyed idea that you hate every man that ever lived, and settled down to the idea of marrying, I intend to be so close at hand you can't shake me off."

She stood facing him, hands tightly clenched and suddenly he put out a gentle hand and touched her shoulder.

"Relax, honey," he said softly. "You've got yourself so keyed-up and tense, you don't know what you're doing or saying. Snap out of it, honey, and don't worry about a thing except Julie. Doc feels you don't even have to worry about her, now that she's going to be in the hands of men trained and skilled to look after youngsters and their ailments."

Granny came back from the dining room as he was leaving, and she stopped him at the door with a question that jerked Nora into anxious awareness of something beside the turmoil within herself. Her own problem had dominated all her thoughts.

"How's things in the Valley, Grady?" asked Granny.

Grady laughed. "Oh, stewing, simmering, popping off, but nothing I can't handle," he chuckled.

"Heard anything about what-all Dexter's doing hereabouts?"

Grady's jaw hardened. "A little. Don't know yet whether it means anything or not. He seems to be having a lot of company after dark, men folks from the Valley, most of it is. I heard there's a good deal of poker playing, and a lot of liquor being disposed of. But so far nothing we can arrest him for. Nobody's filed any charges against him for gambling. Just a few friendly hands of poker, according to the grapevine," he said. "What I can't understand is the fact that he can't possibly win more than a few dollars at a time, no matter how hot a gambler he is. It's surely not enough to keep him here, or to account for the money he spent building that place."

"He's up to devilment," Granny said, grimly.

"Now, that I'm sure of," Grady agreed, "but what sort of devilment is what I have to find out. And I will, too! Sooner or later, I'm going to clamp handcuffs on that guy and have myself a high old time getting the low-dow on what makes him tick."

He smiled warmly at Nora, said, "See you at noon Friday," and went out.

"Granny," Nora burst out when the sound of his car had gone, "where would he get all that money for Julie?"

Granny smiled faintly. "Reckon likely he borrowed it," she said. "Only thing I know is he didn't get it no way that ain't right and legal. Grady's a fine boy. A girl would be mighty lucky to have a fellow like him for a husband."

Nora's mouth twisted painfully. "Reckon he'd want to be mighty sure she was a decent, respectable gal," she said, and began swiftly clearing the table.

Chapter Seventeen

FRIDAY WAS COLD BUT CLEAR, and when Grady arrived, Nora and Julie were ready. Julie's cheeks were pink with excitement, and her eyes were starry. Wrapped in the clumsy old coat, awkwardly cut down by Nora from one of Jennie-Sue's, a red woolen scarf tied about her head, Nora's heart twisted at the shabbiness of the child. For herself she did not care. Anything that kept her warm was all right, but for Julie to have to go to a fine, fancy Atlanta hospital looking so shabby that all her elfin beauty was smothered, was a bitter ache in Nora's heart.

Grady came into the warm kitchen, grinning happily, and carrying a good-sized box in his arms. He greeted them all, and held the box out to Julie. "Hope these fit, Julie," he told her.

Julie put down the doll, without which she had refused to budge out of the house, and her thin fingers tugged at the cord. She lifted the lid of the box, revealing a thick, warm coat of a glowing powder-blue. Beside it was a matching bonnet, and there was soft-grey fur on the collar of the coat and a little round ball of fur on the ribbons of the bonnet. Also, there were blue woolen mittens, and, to Julie's enchanted eyes, best of all there was a small grey fur muff.

"Oh, Grady, you hadn't ought to!" protested Nora, her voice shaken as she saw the child's incredulous delight in the pretty things.

"You don't think I'd let her go off to Atlanta in anything but her best, do you? Julie's my pal, aren't you Julie?" Grady helped the child into the blue coat, tied the bonnet snugly under her small, pointed chin and swooped her up into his arms. "Her suitcase is out in the car. The girl at the shop at the county seat told me what she would need, and she helped me select them. So come on, Nora, let's get going. Time's a-wasting."

Granny beamed at Nora. "Ain't he the beatin'est?" she chuckled and wiped away a tear. "I declare, I ain't never seen Julie so happy. Reckon it's a good thing, too. Now she won't be scared of the hospital."

"Are you sure you'll be all right here, Granny, till I can get back?" Nora asked.

"Now, fer the land sakes, gal, get going, and stop such foolish talk," snapped Granny and pushed her out of the door, standing on the steps to wave to them until the car vanished down the lane.

Nora, with Julie's ordeal at the hospital ahead of her, dreading it, yet straining forward to it in the abject hope it would make Julie strong and healthy like the others, scarcely remembered that drive. Grady drove effortlessly, but with an eye to traffic hazards. Julie chattered with an eagerness born of the new coat, and her gentle fingers stroked the soft fur of the muff, as she lifted bright eyes gratefully to Grady.

The arrival at the hospital was uneventful. The building, big, handsome, set in its own well-kept grounds, surrounded by what was almost slums, awed Nora, and she was deeply grateful for Grady's presence. He seemed completely unawed, unimpressed by surroundings that terrified her by their unfamiliarity.

Inside the lobby, he guided Nora and Julie to a seat, then went to the reception desk. A moment later, he disappeared into a small office, whose glass-paneled door was lettered "Admission of Patients."

Nora was stingingly conscious of the shabbiness of her old coat and of the worn scarf tied over her hair. The women who walked briskly about were either in the crisply-starched white uniform of nurses, or else in smartly-cut town clothes, several of them wearing luxurious fur coats. They all seemed so much at home, so arrogantly sure of themselves, so disdainful of mountain folks.

Nora had a frightened impulse more than once to lift Julie to her feet and hurry her out of here back to the beloved and familiar surroundings of home. Nora was so wrapped in her terror that she was not aware of friendly smiles cast her way by the hurrying nurses, or the two or three beautifully-dressed women who smiled at Julie's eager, absorbed face.

Grady emerged from the office, and came to them, a pretty, red-haired nurse walking beside him, smiling up at him. When they were at Nora's and Julie's side, the nurse said gaily, "So this is Julie. Hi, there, Julie!"

Julie's smile was shy but warm. "Hi!" she answered, and as the nurse held out her hand, Julie slipped hers into it and stood up, obviously perfectly willing to go wherever the nurse was taking her.

As they crossed the lobby and went through a white swinging door, the nurse, leading Julie, and carrying her small suitcase, Nora made an instinctive gesture of protest. She rose and took a step after them, but Grady's hand was on her arm, staying her, his eyes warm, tender and understanding.

"Take it easy, honey!" he said. "I've told them about her. She's in

their hands now, and they are going to take wonderful care of her. This was what you wanted for her, wasn't it?"

"She—she looked—so little and helpless," Nora stammered.

"Look, darling, this is a hospital for children only," he told her, his hands holding hers that were cold and shaking. "The doctors and the nurses have all taken special training, just to know how to take care of children. She won't be frightened, and she won't be lonely and homesick. She'll be in a ward with other kids, and she'll have the time of her life."

"I—reckon so," she agreed.

Grady stood up and brought her to her feet, smiling warmly and tenderly. "Now we've got to find a place for you to stay," he told her with assumed briskness. "I know you want to stay where you can be with Julie as much as the hospital routine will allow. They gave me a list of places where members of families of the patients can find rooms. You can have your meals here in the hospital, if you like, in the cafeteria, but you must have some place to sleep."

"I don't reckon I'll be doing a heap of sleeping," she said through her teeth, but let him guide her out of the hospital.

She took no interest whatever in the neat, clean room that Grady found for her, only two blocks from the hospital. She went with him to a restaurant and ate food that might have been sawdust, for all the taste it held for her.

At last, when he had to leave her to return to his duties back home, she said goodbye to him with a desolate expression that wrung his heart. He held her close in his arms, and she accepted the wordless comfort of his touch that was gentle as a brother's, with no faint hint of the urgency of demand she had felt in his arms before.

She stood on the steps of the rooming house, watching his car drive away. She felt utterly lost and forlorn. Listlessly she went into the room he had found for her, closed the door and dropped into a chair, staring straight before her, numb with exhaustion . . .

Each morning Nora made her way to the hospital, cringing before the noise and the clamor. The crowds of the city that terrified her anew each time she faced it. All day she sat huddled on a bench, save for the few minutes she was allowed with Julie. She was dumbly, humbly grateful for every kindly word, for every gesture of sympathy offered her, and there were many.

On the third morning, she was summoned by the pretty red-haired nurse into the small private office of the surgeon, and there he gave

her the word for which she had been praying and hoping, yet that she had feared she might not hear.

"Julie's fine, Miss Anderson," he told her. "We have completed all the X-rays and the various tests. We find there is an obstruction in the lower intestine. It has kept her from getting the nourishment from her food that she needs, and it has kept her from having any appetite. Her system is poisoned—."

He broke off, alarmed at the sudden ashen pallor of her face. "My dear girl, I don't mean to alarm you," he protested. "The operation is extremely simple, delicate, yes, but one we perform here many times. It is no more serious than having a tooth extracted. Julie will be up and about, ready to leave for home, within a week or ten days after the operation."

Nora's hands were tightly clenched, and there were tears in her eyes. "She's going to get well?" she whispered.

"Well, of course she is, barring any complications, which we do not anticipate. Aside from this condition, she's a fine, husky little girl, or she will be. Under-nourished, of course, because of this obstruction; slightly anemic, naturally, but we've been building her up since she came in here. Now, you just stop worrying. She's going to be fine."

Doc Barlow came down to be present at the operation, and Grady was there, too. Nora was passionately grateful for Grady's presence, for his hand holding hers firmly, while the time passed. It seemed to her that it was hours, endless hours after the small white-covered figure on the wheeled table was rolled into the operating room, before at last it was returned, and gentle hands got the sleeping child into bed.

Doc Barlow came to Nora and Grady in the lobby, after the nurse had shooed them firmly out of the room, and his eyes were aglow.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" he enthused. "I can't tell you what it meant to me to see these men at work. Now, maybe I've learned something that will help me take better care of other youngsters like Julie."

"Is she going to be all right?" Nora pleaded for reassurance.

"All right? Why, she'll come out of this strong enough to lick her weight in wildcats and give the wildcat the first hold," said Doc Barlow.

Nora fought hard against tears of abject relief. Grady's arm closed about her for a moment, holding her close, smiling down at her

tenderly, until she became aware of his touch, aware of the growing flame in his eyes and drew away from him. A curtain seemed to fall over Grady's eyes.

The days sped for Nora after that. The nights were aching voids of homesickness, but when mornings came, and Nora was allowed to spend more and more time beside Julie, seeing each day an improvement in the child, Nora was filled with a tremendous gratitude for the miracle spread before her. At last the morning came when Julie could leave the hospital to be taken home, to begin a new life.

Grady had driven down for them, and in the car headed north to her beloved mountains, Nora drew a great breath and let it out in a vast sigh. "I declare to goodness, I don't see how city folks ever stand it," she burst out. "All them folks rushing about; the cars, whooshing past, nearly running over a body; all that noise and the smells and the commotion. No wonder they like to come up to the mountains summer times and get the smell and the noise out of themselves."

"I take it you wouldn't care to live in town, Nora?" Grady teased her.

"Live? That wouldn't be living. That would be like being locked up somewheres in prison."

Grady laughed agreement. "I feel the same way," he admitted and added, "Granny's tickled to pieces you're going to get home in time for pounding the preacher, by the way."

Nora stared at him, hungry for news of home. "How come they're pounding him?" she demanded.

"Now, don't tell me, Nora, that you don't know what pounding the preacher means," Grady laughed. "Granny was pretty disgusted with me because I had to have it explained to me."

"Oh, sure, I know what it means," Nora said. "It means a play party where everybody takes a pound of something to put in the preacher's pantry, only I ain't never heard tell of pounding an unmarried preacher."

"That's just it. The Reverend Stuart is no longer an unmarried preacher. Seems he and that pretty schoolteacher, Miss Cofer, eloped across the state line a few days ago and got married."

"Well, now, I do say!" marveled Nora, wide-eyed. "Now ain't that just fine?"

Grady looked down at her curiously. "Then you don't disapprove of marriage after all, Nora?" he asked with surface lightness, though his eyes were steady and grave.

Color bloomed in her cheeks, and she would not meet his eyes. "Well, goodness, no. I ain't got nothing against marriage for them that want to be married," she said.

"But you don't." Grady's tight voice made it a statement, rather than a question.

She lifted her chin defiantly, her face turned straight ahead, so that only her profile was visible. "Marrying ain't fer me. I got—other things on my mind," she said, and saw Grady's jaw set hard and his hands tighten on the wheel.

They traveled several miles in silence before she asked hesitantly, "Was Julie's bill at the hospital awful big?"

"Much less than Doc Barlow expected," Grady told her.

After a moment she said awkwardly, "I ain't ever going to be able to pay you back."

"Have I asked you to?" His voice was curt.

"It ain't only the money," Nora went on, as though he had not spoken. "Reckon I can get that paid some day, if you'll let me pay it a little at a time, a mighty little, I reckon, and it'll take a long, long time. But it ain't the money that I owe you so much as all the rest. Your being so kind and so helping. So—so neighborly!"

"I did only what I wanted to do, Nora, and you owe me nothing whatever, so let's skip it, shall we?"

Grady was unexpectedly grim and harsh. Her hands clenched tightly, and she could find no words to answer him.

Chapter Eighteen

THEIR WELCOME HOME WAS, OF COURSE, TUMULTUOUS. Granny could not get over marveling at Julie, who had gained weight and color, and who had a vivacity and an animation entirely new for her. Nor could Granny tire of asking Nora excited questions about what it was like down in the the flatlands, and were people very different from the mountain folks.

"Sakes alive," she sighed. "Sounds like it might be right interesting, but I don't figure I could stand it, and I ain't wanting to try."

Getting ready for the preacher's pounding party had the whole Valley excited and busy. Even though there were many of them who disliked the earnest young man's meek and mild sermons, he was their preacher, the one the Conference had assigned to them, and they aimed to do him proud. Miss Cofer was well-liked and popular, and though there had been a few who felt it wasn't fitting for a married woman to go on teaching school, the School Board met in solemn conclave and decided to ask her to stay on for the balance of the school year.

The neat four-room house next door to the church had been cleaned and made ready for them, and furnished by various groups and Sunday school classes. Assurance had been gravely given that come spring and warm weather, the house would be painted.

On Friday night the destination of every vehicle that could be called transportation throughout the Valley was in the church lot, and the small, neat house next door. Lighted windows spilled amber-colored glow out into the snow, and every time the door opened, there were bursts of laughter and excited voices.

Nora parked the pick-up truck, and helped Granny down, the children tumbling out around her. Granny carrying a pound of sugar, Nora with a pound of butter, each of the children armed with a pound of something that would add to the pantry shelves of the parsonage trooped into the house and were warmly welcomed.

News, of course, that Julie and Nora had been to the flatlands where Julie had had an operation had spread the length and breadth of the Valley, so Julie divided attention with the flushed, happy-eyed bride and her proud, young husband, who seemed already to have taken on extra stature, and who seemed less gaunt and harassed.

Surrounded by her friends and neighbors, Nora did not at first see Dexter, though he managed unobtrusively to find his way to her at last and to stand looking down at her, a bright fire of deviltry in his eyes, as he greeted her. Her own eyes were bitter with loathing and contempt as she looked up at him briefly and then away. She would have moved away from him, but his hand caught her arm, and he lowered his voice so that it reached no further than her ears.

"Glad you were able to take the kid away, Nora, and I very much appreciate your keeping that hick sheriff occupied as much as you did. He was about to begin getting in my hair."

Nora looked up at him, hostility in every line of her tautly held body. "Reckon he can still get in your hair if he wants to," she said. "So don't be so smug, Mr. Dexter."

"Oh, I suppose so." Dexter dismissed the idea with a laugh. "The point is that I needed a breathing space. If I'd had any idea that your going to Atlanta would take him away, too, damned if I wouldn't have given you the money myself."

Nora said through her teeth, "I'm mighty glad you didn't. I'd sure hate to think I owed you as much as a thank you kindly."

"Oh, well, as long as you got the money," said Dexter, and broke off, frowning, to ask, "And by the way, it has occurred to me to wonder. Just where did you get the money?"

"That ain't none of your business," she snapped at him.

His eyes swept her with a glance that brought back a sick, shuddering memory of that hour spent in his arms, and he laughed softly, a laugh that was an insult. "Oh, well, where there are men around, a girl with what you've got to offer never has much trouble laying her hands on money, does she?" he drawled.

The room was crowded now, clamorous with friendly voices, too warm because the fireplace had been heaped with fresh-cut logs. When the door opened, to let in a gust of snowy, icy air, people turned, startled, only to be more startled by the group who entered the room.

Grady Kilburn was guiding a stout, middle-aged woman dressed as no mountain-woman had ever dressed. She was wearing city clothes, smartly, expensively cut, worn beneath a fur coat of soft, shining gold-brown fur. There was a twinkle of jewels at her throat and her ears. She was a woman whose soft, ravaged face was blue with cold beneath her deft, expensive make-up. She stood just inside the door, shaking with cold, despite her thick, luxurious coat. Her

eyes, troubled, unhappy swept the room under Grady's low-voiced words.

Dexter had stood riveted to the floor for a moment when the woman had been ushered into the room. He had seen the two neatly-dressed, unobtrusive-looking men follow them, and close the door and stand leaning against it. Then he turned and moved swiftly towards the door that led in to the kitchen, but before he reached it, two more men stood there, hands sunk deep into overcoat pockets, and one said softly, "Hold it, Buster."

It was Dexter's movement, in that crowded, now-silent room that drew the woman's eyes to him. Because the men had barred his escape, Dexter turned at bay, and met her eyes, his jaw hardening as his face darkened.

"Well, Jonathan," said the woman at last, her voice low, but because of the tense, puzzled silence in the room, reaching every straining ear. "So I've found you."

"This is the man, Mrs. Hollister?" asked Grady.

"Oh, yes," said the woman, her voice very tired. "This is my husband, Gerald Hollister."

A little ripple ran over the room, and silence again, as eyes traveled from Dexter to the woman and back again.

"This is the man who robbed you of two hundred thousand dollars in cash and negotiable securities, and drove away in your car, Mrs. Hollister?" Grady pursued, while the two men behind him, the two at the kitchen door kept their eyes fixed on Dexter.

Somebody had pushed a chair forward, and Mrs. Hollister, shaking had dropped into it and put her gloved hands over her face.

Dexter was watching her, livid, his eyes blazing with hate, his mind swiftly darting this way and that for some defense, some protest. Before he could manage anything, however, Mrs. Hollister dropped her hands and drew a deep, hard breath and looked straight at him.

"This is the man I married six months ago," she said. "He persuaded me to turn certain assets into cash on the plea that we would go to one of the Caribbean Islands and invest in a business. Ten days after our marriage, he vanished, taking my car with him."

"I can explain—," Dexter began, but another voice, a high thin wail cut him short. Suddenly Liza-Jane was standing between him and the woman who had just proclaimed herself his wife.

"It's not so, Jimmie. Tell her it's not so. She's not your wife. You're not married, Jimmie. You can't be. You promised to marry me,

Jimmie—. You've got to marry me. Jimmy, you've got to! Liza-Jane wailed.

There was a stunned moment of utter incredulity as eyes that had traveled between Dexter and the strange woman now swung to Liza-Jane, who was crying hysterically, her young body hunched, as though trying still to hide its slight thickening that until this moment none of them had noticed.

Nora broke the stunned silence. Moving so swiftly that no one could guess her intention, nor move to stop her, she had caught the revolver from Grady's holster, and her shaking hands leveled it at Dexter. Even as her finger pressed the trigger, and the shot resounded, Grady was upon her, knocking her hand up so that the bullet missed Dexter and went into the wall above his head.

Grady held Nora, despite her frantic struggles, and for a moment, pandemonium reigned in the room. Through it all, the cold-eyed men, two at either exit from the room stood alert, hands in overcoat pockets, never taking their eyes off Dexter.

"Nora, stop it! Give me that gun," rasped Grady, holding Nora, despite her frantic struggles.

"Let me go, Grady Kilburn. Let me go. He ain't fit to live. I'll kill him! I'll kill him, damn his filthy soul to hell. I'll kill him!" raged Nora, her voice a high, thin scream that struck eerily on all ears.

"LEAVE that to the law, Nora," urged Grady, but her hands were clenched so tightly on the gun, and his necessity of holding her arms so intense that he dared not release his grip for a moment to wrest the gun from her.

"Give it to me, Nora," said Preacher Stuart quietly, so quietly that his voice was like a cool hand laid on her fevered fury.

Without being conscious of it, her fingers loosened slightly so that he was able to take the gun out of their grasp.

Nora had collapsed now in Grady's arms, her body shaken so violently that without his support she could not have stood, and her wild sobbing was violent in the tense room.

It was Liza-Jane's thin, broken voice that brought Nora back to some semblance of self-control.

"I loved him, Nora. He said he loved me. He was going to marry me and we were going away from here," she wailed.

The need of one of her family was always the compelling force that could control Nora. Now all the fight went out of her. Grady, sensing her sudden limpness, loosened his grip on her. She sank to her knees beside the chair in which Liza-Jane huddled like a broken thing. Her arms gathered the girl close, and held her, crooning to her as she brushed the hair back from the girl's tear-sodden face.

"Of course you did. Of course you did, honey darling," she said softly. "You couldn't know what a skunk he was. It wasn't your fault, honey."

Liza-Jane lifted shamed, tear-wet eyes to Nora's and said whimpering, "But I'm going to have a baby, Nora. I—think I am."

Nora winced, and her mouth drew tight. The next moment she said soothingly, "Well, we'll take care of it and raise it decent and love it. Don't you worry none, now, honey lamb."

Mrs. Hollister had sat limply in her chair, looking across the room at Dexter, who was watching the two girls, and darting anxious, uneasy eyes about the grim-faced men who had moved closer to him the moment after Liza-Jane had cried out her secret.

"You vile, loathesome worm!" said Mrs. Hollister, and in the taut silence of the room that was broken only by Liza-Jane's sobbing, her low voice rang with savage bitterness. "I think I could almost have

forgiven you for robbing me, Jonathan. But this—this abuse of a mere child—this is beyond forgiveness."

"Child, hell!" snarled Dexter. "She's grown up in everything but years. The little fool kept hanging around me, trying to get me to take her to bed with me, and I gave in to keep her quiet."

"Easy, fellows," said Grady sharply, reading the temper of the mountain men. "The law will handle him."

The uneasy growling of the men subsided somewhat, but did not entirely stop.

"We got laws up in these parts that will take good care of him," said one of the mountain men. "Laws been in force hell of a longer time than you've been sheriff."

Grady looked swiftly about the room and back at Dexter. "See how lucky you are, Dexter, that it was the FBI men who got you, instead of these men here?" he drawled.

Dexter's eyes flickered swiftly from one to the other of the four cold-eyed men who were watching him so alertly.

"I've done nothing the FBI would be interested in," he snarled.

The older of the four men grinned, tight-lipped. "Oh, you'd be surprised, Dexter-Hollister, whatever your name is, and I'm pretty sure it's neither of those" he drawled. "Matter of fact, we've been interested in you for quite awhile. You'd be surprised how interested we became. Remember that fake oil lease deal out in Texas? And that fellow-rook you bumped off in New Orleans? And there were certain deals in Miami, and Mobile. Oh, we're very much interested in you Dexter. Several times we almost had our hands on you, but you're a pretty slippery customer, so we're very grateful to Sheriff Kilburn, who got curious as to why a city slicker like you would want to move into a hideout like this, and then set up a series of poker games and dice games to fleece the locals of their nickels and dimes. That was so small-time we could hardly make ourselves believe it was really you. But, of course, we know now that you were gypping the locals of eating money so you wouldn't have to dip into your stake that you'd taken from your wife. By the way, that was a fairly slick place you hid the money."

Dexter started, and his face paled.

"Oh, sure," the man's grin answered Dexter's glance. "We found it, almost intact. I suppose you spent only what you had to, so that when you felt the heat was off enough for you to make a run for it, you'd have a stake. Well, we have found it."

"That was money my wife gave me. You can't hold me for stealing it." Dexter still tried to bluster.

Unexpectedly Mrs. Hollister spoke, to say quietly, "That's quite right, you know. I did give it to him."

Grady and the four men stared at her, shocked.

She smiled faintly. "Oh, I intend to prosecute, if it's necessary, but from what you have said, I don't imagine it will be. And anyway, he didn't know I'd given him the money. He meant to rob me."

"Just that you were so mistaken, Jonathan, when you thought that was all the money I had," she said. "I'm a very wealthy woman, Jonathan. I never cared to make a parade of it, nor to live extravagantly. I preferred to live quietly, to let people think whatever they chose. When you chose to believe that all I had was that two hundred thousand dollars, I saw no reason to explain, not until we had been married long enough to be sure—fool that I was—that you really loved me.

"When you began urging me to turn all my assets into cash, on the plea that we'd go to one of the Caribbean Islands and invest in some sort of business and make our home there, I yielded. By then I was beginning to—well, to wake up from some of my rosy dreams. After only a few days of marriage, I realized that you showed a rather consuming interest in my financial standing. But I intended all along that the money and the car should be yours, so that you could have your own checking account and not have to come to me for spending money. You grabbed it and ran. So then I knew just how much of a fool I'd been."

Dexter stood tense, watching her, while wave after wave of bitter realization of the wreck he had made of his whole life through his failure to understand this woman washed over him. She was rich! The two hundred thousand would have been a gift! He could have lived in luxury the rest of his life, and all he would have had to do was be gracious and charming to the damned old cow!

Something of his thoughts was apparent to the woman, and she nodded quietly. "Oh, I'm as much to blame for letting you take me in as you are for trying to and succeeding so well," she said evenly. "I've been widowed for more than ten years. I was bitterly lonely. My whole life seemed to lack purpose and meaning. Then I met you, and though I knew that you were years younger than I, and that a good-looking man with great charm and personality would not waste his time on a woman fat and middle-aged as I am, I let myself

be blinded. I more than suspected it was money you wanted, but like the fool I was, I was glad I had it for you. This is what it has all led up to."

Dexter made a terrific effort, and on his face was a pale glimmer of his coaxing, ingratiating smile, as he came towards her, his hands extended pleadingly. "Lois, this whole thing has been a ghastly misunderstanding," he began breathlessly. "If only you and I can be alone together, away from this—this rabble, I can explain it all."

She studied him for a long moment, and hope flared in his eyes. Then suddenly she laughed, a laugh as mirthless, as bitter as though her hand had struck him hard full across the mouth.

"Let's go, Dexter," said the man who stood behind Dexter, his gun prodding him none too gently in the small of the back, and as the group parted, Dexter walked out of the room, two men behind him, urging him on, the other two men leading the way.

Liza-Jane caught her breath in a small, sobbing cry as the door closed behind them. She lifted her face for a moment to look at Nora. "Don't hate me, Nora. Don't hate me," she pleaded in a broken gasp.

Nora's arms gathered her close. "Hate you, honey? Liza-Jane, honey, how could I hate you? How could *I* hate you?" she said softly, and looked up to meet Grady's eyes.

For a long moment his eyes held hers, probing, searching, as though the unconscious emphasis on the pronoun had caught his ear. As she watched him, shrinking from what she saw in his eyes, his jaw hardened and he turned away from her.

"If you're ready, Mrs. Hollister, I'll drive you back to the hotel," he said.

Mrs. Hollister's eyes swept the group of silent people, and a dark, mottled color crept into her haggard face as she made an effort to rise. Grady's hand fitted assuringly under her elbow, and she leaned gratefully on his arm as she stood up. He guided her to the door and out into the bitter, cold night. She no longer moved with assurance. She no longer seemed a well-preserved, stout, middle-aged woman. She seemed shrunken. Her shoulders drooped. She had become suddenly old.

NORA DREW A LONG, HARD BREATH and straightened, her arm still protectively abonut Liza-Jane. Her eyes swept the group of people who stood back, not hostile but withdrawn, remote, as though somehow the Andersons had stepped outside their orbit.

The Reverend Stuart, his face drawn and harassed, took a step forward to speak comforting words, but Nora's swift gesture silenced him as she drew Liza-Jane out of the house, leaving Granny to make their brief goodbyes and to herd the rest of the puzzled, big-eyed children after them.

Nobody spoke on that short, rough drive back to the lonely farmhouse. The three younger children were unaware of all the implications of what had happened. They had been frightened and puzzled by the gun-play and by the loud, angry voices. Only Johnny, mountain-born and bred, and already on the threshold of manhood understood dimly that Liza-Jane had shamed and disgrace the family, and his young jaw set hard at the thought of all the fights he must have with other boys his age and older who would say ugly, slurring things about his sister.

When they reached the house, Granny shooed the younger children off to bed, and Nora went with Liza-Jane, soothing the girl's shame and remorse, while she helped to get her into bed. There Liza-Jane caught Nora's work-roughened hand and drew it against her tear-wet cheek.

"Oh, Nora, you're so good to me, and I don't deserve it," she wailed like a stricken child. "I've been bad and cheap and—and—like Meg Thatcher."

"Now, you stop that foolish talk," said Nora sternly. "You made a mistake, sure. Well lots of people make mistakes. And it ain't never going to happen no more. So you just lie there, and get some sleep and we'll talk tomorrow."

"I've been such a crazy fool!"

Nora stayed beside the girl until exhaustion overcame Liza-Jane and she slept.

When Nora came back to the lamp-lit kitchen, Granny had built up the fire in the kitchen stove and had drawn up her rocker in front of it. She had turned back her dress skirt neatly and was

warming her scrawny old shanks, while she puffed away at her ancient, corncob pipe.

"Pull up a chair and set, Nora," she invited. "Reckon you ain't feeling no sleepier than I am. This here has sure been a night. Folks in the Valley will be talking it over for many a day."

Nora stood rigid behind the chair, her face white and set, her eyes dark and sick. Granny pretended not to notice as she went on talking.

"Reckon we sure know now what a fellow like Dexter was doing up here in the mountains," she said cheerfully. "Think of it. Him a murderer and worse, and us having him right here in the house, same as if he was decent folks."

Nora said through her teeth, "Granny, he–knows."

Granny looked up at her sharply. "Who knows? And what does he know?" she demanded.

"Grady knows. About me and–and–Dexter." Nora pushed the words from her with sick distaste.

"How'd he know? Reckon you didn't tell him?"

"He–just looked at me, and I could see it in his eyes. He knew! Now I reckon he purely despises me." Nora's voice broke.

Granny hesitated, and then she said reluctantly, "Well, I reckon maybe so he does. Fellow like Grady's powerful set on their women folk being decent and respectable."

Nora burst out savagely, "I wish he'd have let me kill that snake!"

"That would have been nice, wouldn't it?" Granny said. "Them there revenuers there in the room. They'd have marched you off to jail, and maybe hung you!"

"They weren't revenuers, Granny," Nora corrected her thinly.

"They were government men, weren't they? And government men are revenuers," said Granny. "I ain't got no love for them. Leastways, I never did have till tonight. But it purely did my heart good to see them march that cussed rascal out of there."

Nora was in the chair now, leaning forward, her elbows on her knees, her face hidden in her hands. "Granny, what are we gonna do?" She brought it forth in a stricken whisper.

"We're going to face up to it, Nora, same as me and you have always done," said Granny. "I always was one to stand up and fight, and so are you. That's what we're going to do now."

"And–Liza-Jane's–baby?"

Granny's old face tightened, but her eyes were clear. "We're going to love it and raise it decent, same as all the Andersons have been

raised," she snapped. "We're going to forget who its pappy was, and what a skunk he was. We're just going to remember it's Liza-Jane's young 'un, and we're going to help her raise it, that's what we're going to do."

Nora smiled at her dimly, white-faced. "You're a sight of comfort to a body, Granny," she said. "I'm thanking you kindly."

"If I couldn't be a bit of comfort to you, Nora, I wouldn't be earning my bread and meat, living here on you and the young 'uns," said the old woman. "Now let's me and you get us some sleep. I'm plum tuckered-out and I know you are, too."

Nora nodded. They put out the lamp and went on to the bed-room. But long after Granny's healthy snores announced that she was sleeping soundly, Nora lay wide-eyed, holding herself rigid, lest she disturb her bed-fellow by her restlessness. She found that sleep had never been further away from her than at this moment.

She was sick with the pity of Liza-Jane's shaming before the entire Valley. The future loomed ahead dark and ugly for the child and for the unwanted baby that she must bear. Once or twice, the ugly picture of Meg Thatcher crowded before Nora, but she put it furiously away from her. She would take care of Liza-Jane, she promised herself. Then a cynical voice seemed to whisper bitterly, "You done a fine job of it so far, haven't you?"

Gradually, Nora's own problem crowded above that of Liza-Jane. She was tortured by the look in Grady's eyes when she had impulsively revealed, if not to the entire roomful of people, surely to him, the fact that she, too, had shared Dexter's bed.

It was near dawn when a sudden thought leaped full-blown from her puzzled, heart-sick ponderings. Liza-Jane had yielded her young body to Dexter and had "got in the family way." She, Nora, had also submitted to him. Was she, too, carrying a child by Dexter?

It was a thought so sudden, so awful that she crept out of bed and went, barefoot and in her thick, shapeless flannel nightgown into the kitchen, to build up the fire and sit huddled there, too dazed, too terrified for coherent thought.

There, some time later, Granny found her. "What in time you doing setting their in your shimmy and barefoot as a yard dog, Nora? You sick?" demanded Granny.

Nora lifted a white face and fear-ridden eyes. "Granny," she whispered, "do you reckon I'm in a family way, too?"

Granny gasped and dropped into a chair and stared at Nora. "My sakes, gal," she whispered after a moment, "don't you know?"

Nora shook her head. "I ain't had any sign," she murmured painfully, because the children were stirring, and they would be in the kitchen any minute. "But I—stayed with Dexter, too."

Granny's eyes were sharp and penetrating, frightened. "How many times, gal?" she demanded.

Nora shrank. "Only once, Granny, when he said he'd give me the money fer Julie. I couldn't have lived through it more than once."

Granny nodded and let out her breath in a great sigh.

"Then I reckon you're safe, or you'd know something by now," she said.

Nora closed her eyes and clenched her fists tight. She had been with Grady, too, and nothing had happened after that. She felt now that a terrible weight had been taken from her mind by Granny, whose knowledge was, to Nora, the law and gospel. Hadn't Granny been a "Birthing Woman" for forty years? There was little Granny did not know about babies, and the women who bore them and the men who fathered them. So she was free of the terror that she, too, might be carrying Dexter's child as Liza-Jane was.

In that moment of sharp relief, she had a tremendously disquieting thought. If somehow she was pregnant, how would she know whether it was Grady's child or Dexter's? To have a child, and not to know which man was its father would be an unendurable horror. To bear Grady's child would be sweet and wonderful beyond realization—.

"What in time are you setting there thinking about? You look just like somebody gave you a bright, shiny new present," demanded Granny.

Nora stood up hurriedly, her face scarlet and muttered something about getting her clothes on and starting the chores.

As she fled, Granny stared after her for a long moment and then she sighed, shook her head and began briskly to get breakfast ready.

It was at the breakfast table, when he and Nora had completed the chores, that Johnny delivered his bombshell.

Granny had said, "Now, you young 'uns make haste and finish eating so you can get ready for Sunday school."

Johnny said flatly, "I ain't going."

Nora looked swiftly at his young, taut face.

"I'm not going back to school no more, either, and it ain't going to do no good for you to try to make me, neither," Johnny told her

belligerently. "I'm a man, and its time I was out helping to make a living for my family." His eyes swept the table accusingly and lingered for a moment at Liza-Jane's vacant place.

"But, Johnny–," Nora began.

"You're wasting time arguing with me, Nora. My mind's done made up," said Johnny in a tone that was so adult, so bitter that it left Nora speechless. "You think I aim to go to school and hear fellows saying things about my sister? I'll be in a fight from first bell till the school bus comes. I'm going to the county seat, and get me a job, and nobody's going to stop me."

With a sinking heart Nora realized the justice of his stand. For the first time he was not awkward, lanky, growing-up-too-fast Johnny. He was, as he had claimed, a man. His determination had grown to meet his big, strong body.

"I'm aiming to come home every night," he told her. "And I'm aiming to bring my wages home for the family, but I ain't going to school no more." With that he stood up, thrust his chair back and stalked out of the room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

GRANNY studied Nora for a long moment, and then she said quietly, "I reckon maybe it's best, Nora. I reckon the boy knows right smart what he's doing."

Nora nodded, her hands clenched tightly together. "Reckon I ain't going to try to stop him, Granny," she said. "Reckon I couldn't if I tried. He's old enough to know his own mind."

Jennie-Sue, Bill and Julie were watching and listening, puzzled and troubled by all the cross-currents that were swirling about them, but unable to find a clue that would solve the puzzle.

Granny glanced at them and then at the windows where feathery snowflakes were beginning to fall.

"Ain't no use nobody trying to go to meeting nor Sunday school neither, day like this," she announced. "Billy boy, you go build a nice fire in the sitting room, and we'll just stay inside and maybe pop some corn and tell stories."

The children whooped with delight and raced away to obey.

"We got to go to the Valley sooner or later, Granny," Nora pointed out. "We can't just hide here."

"We don't have to go today," snapped Granny and began briskly clearing the table.

Liza-Jane crept from her room a little later. She sipped a little coffee and nibbled at a biscuit. She pushed a piece of ham around on her plate, making a pretense of eating. She shrank from even the gentlest glance or word.

It was mid-morning, and the snow was falling more thickly when a car came feeling its way up the lane. It was such a car as the lane had never seen before, an expensive sedan, sleek and graceful, with a stout, uniformed chauffeur at the wheel.

Granny and Nora peered excitedly out of the kitchen window as the car stopped. The man slid from behind the wheel, glanced about him and started towards the house.

"My sakes alive, he's coming to the front door!" gasped Granny. "He sure ain't no Valley man. Nobody in the Valley ever comes to the front door."

Nora answered a peremptory knock on the door, and opened it to look timidly up at the man's round, ruddy, well-fed face.

"Is this the Anderson farm?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir," said Nora. "I'm Nora Anderson."

The man cast an appalled glance into the dark, icy-cold hall, looked about him at the bleak landscape and then, shuddering, turned without a word and walked back to the car, where he swung the door open and extended a hand to its passenger.

Granny, peering from the kitchen window, gasped, "Why, land of living, it's that Miz' Hollister."

Nora was waiting at the front door, and the chauffeur guided Mrs. Hollister, her mink coat wrapped tightly about her, up the steps.

"Perhaps you'd better wait inside, Jeffreys," she told the man.

"Thank you, Madam, I shall be perfectly comfortable in the car," said the chauffeur firmly and went plowing his way through the snow back to the car.

"Please come in, ma'am," Nora invited. "It's purely cold outside."

"It was presumptuous of me to call without telephoning first," said Mrs. Hollister, stepping into the icy hall.

"We ain't got no telephone, ma'am, and we're plum proud to have you," said Nora. "There's a fire in the sitting room."

When the opened door revealed the children sprawled in front of the fire, Mrs. Hollister drew back. "Isn't there somewhere where we could talk in private?" she asked.

"Well, yes, ma'am, if you don't mind sitting in the kitchen," Nora offered. She led the way down the hall, and opened the kitchen door.

"Granny, this here's Miz' Hollister," Nora said. "And this is Granny Witham, Miz' Hollister."

Mrs. Hollister was gracious and pleasant, but it was obvious that she had something important on her mind. As she saw Liza-Jane huddled there in a shadowy corner, she put out her hand with an instinctive gesture of greeting, and her smile warmed. "I'm very glad to see you again, my dear," she said when she had greeted Granny. "It's about you that I've come."

Liza-Jane's hands clenched tightly, and her eyes widened. "About me, Mrs. Hollister?" she asked.

"Take a cheer, ma'am, and heist your feet on that there stool to warm them," Granny urged hospitably, puzzled but too versed in mountain manners to show any curiosity about a visitor until the person was ready to reveal the purpose of the visit.

Mrs. Hollister smiled and sat, and when the others were perched on the edge of chairs, waiting expectantly, she looked swiftly at Nora.

"I've talked to that nice young sheriff, Miss Anderson," she began eagerly, "and I have given him full information about myself; references and so on."

"My land!" Granny gasped. "You ain't in trouble with them revenuers, are you?"

Mrs. Hollister looked startled, and then she smiled. "Oh, no, Mrs. Witham, It was just that I am a stranger here, and before I came to you with my proposition, I felt I should establish my responsibility. I felt the sheriff would be the proper person, since he would have the necessary facilities to check my background, my references, and all the rest of it."

"Well, now, I do say," murmured Granny politely, so completely at sea that she looked like a scrawny old owl, bright-eyed and waiting.

Mrs. Hollister said quietly to Nora, "You see, Miss Anderson, I want to adopt Liza-Jane."

There was a moment of stunned silence in which the other three stared at the woman, as though suddenly she had grown three heads.

"I've never had a child," Mrs. Hollister began hurriedly, fearful of denial. "I've always wanted a daughter. I've been very lonely, and that's why I made a fool of myself with—the man you knew as Dexter. Last night, when I saw this lovely child and realized what a hideous thing he had done, it made me sick with loathing. All night last night I lay awake, thinking that if Liza-Jane would come and live with me, and be my adopted child, I could take care of her, make up to her in some small measure for the evil that has been done to her. I would be so very good to her, Miss Anderson. I'd take care of her. It would be such fun to buy lovely clothes for her, and give parties for her. I'll take her abroad, and show her all the wonders of the world. Oh, Miss Anderson, I will love her very deeply and care for her very tenderly. I promise it!"

Nora blinked as the spate of eager words poured over her, and she looked at Liza-Jane who was staring at Mrs. Hollister as though she knew all this was some bright, fantastic dream that could not possibly be really happening.

Their silence sent Mrs. Hollister rushing into words once more. "Now you can understand why I had a long talk with that nice young sheriff, and told him all about myself, and answered all the questions he could think of asking."

"Well, I just don't know what to say, ma'am," Nora managed at last.

"Well, I do!" flashed Liza-Jane. "I know exactly what to say. It's

that I'm thanking you, Mrs. Hollister, and I'll do my very best never to make you ashamed of me."

Nora gasped, "You want to go with her, Liza-Jane?"

Liza-Jane's lovely head was high. "Want to? I intend to! I'd be a fool if I didn't! You think I want to stay here in the Valley and have people say nasty things about me, like they do Meg Thatcher? I've always hated the Valley and just about all the people in it. I've always wanted to get away, to go somewhere where people live with some kind of comfort. Where you see something beautiful now and then, and hear music and people laughing—." Her voice broke, and she turned sharply away, to conceal her tears.

Mrs. Hollister was watching her, tenderness in her eyes. "My dear, dear child!" she said softly.

Granny cleared her throat and said grimly, "You ain't forgetting ma'am about the baby?"

Liza-Jane tensed, and Mrs. Hollister looked saddened.

"No, Mrs. Witham, I haven't forgotten about the baby," she said and turned a swift protest to Nora, as though to counter something Nora had been about to say. "I am not making this offer just because there is going to be a baby. Oh, I suppose that's partly it, the feeling that I am, in a way, responsible for—his coming here to the Valley and causing so much trouble. But I've been very lonely, and I've often thought how wonderful it would be to have a daughter, a young and lovely daughter, to give her all the lovely things such a girl should have. But the baby will be—well, a sort of added happiness. I will take Liza-Jane away, where the baby will be born. Then I will formally adopt it, and after that Liza-Jane can be free to have all the fun and good times that any young girl should have."

It went on, of course, for more than two hours, the discussion, the questions offered awkwardly but earnestly by Nora; the frantic insistence from Liza-Jane that she wanted to go; Granny's troubled, uneasy silence infrequently broken, but when it was, by some pertinent, penetrating comment that brought added light. In the end, as had been inevitable from the arrival of Mrs. Hollister with her astounding proposition, she and the girl climbed into the car and were driven away by the stout, ruddy-faced chauffeur.

Liza-Jane had said goodbye to her home, to her family, to the mountains she had always hated. She had gone through the dark, ugly shadows of youthful passion and fear, into the sunlight of a life of luxury and beauty. Only Nora seemed deeply hurt by the brusque-

ness of Liza-Jane's goodbye, by her frantic eagerness to get away.

Watching Nora, as she stood at the window seeing the car vanish, Granny said gently, "Wouldn't have been reasonable, Nora, to expect her to refuse the lady. Maybe it's better this way."

"I reckon," said Nora, and clenched her hands tightly against the bitter emotion that tortured her.

No need now to blame herself for what had happened to Liza-Jane, for a lack of understanding and sympathy. She had been so absorbed in Julie that she had neglected Liza-Jane. But it was too late now for such thoughts. Liza-Jane was gone, and she had made it plain that she would never return to the Valley, not even for a visit. She was done with the mountains and mountain folks whom she despised.

"Goodbye, Liza-Jane," Nora whispered. "Good luck, darling."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

NORA TOLD HERSELF often in the long, long days that dragged by uneventfully that she had never seen so long nor so wearisome a winter. Though dawn came late, though the days were thick with dark clouds, and "first dark" came by four in the afternoon, though the chores had to be done by lantern light, though each day held only a few hours of reluctant daylight, they seemed to Nora to stretch endlessly, so that at night she fell into bed exhausted physically, but still able to sleep only fitfully.

Not even to herself in the innermost recesses of her heart would she admit that she was longing for Grady Kilburn who had made it painfully plain that he had no further use for her. It was a bitter, corrosive thing for a girl who had hated men all her life, to have to admit that now she loved a man who loathed her for the submission she had given to another.

Throughout the Valley the news that a big, fine car had driven up to the Anderson place and whisked Liza-Jane away to a life of luxury with the stranger, Miz' Hollister, created a nine-day sensation. Beside glowing hearth-fires in farm homes up and down the Valley it was an endless topic for conversation. Wherever two women met, they discussed it. Even the men folks talked about it. Gradually the feeling that Liza-Jane had been a shameless wanton gave way to the unwilling admission that she had been a mighty lucky girl.

Jennie-Sue and Bill at school were quizzed endlessly on what Liza-Jane had written home. Jennie-Sue was vaguely aware that some censure about her sister had turned into an unwilling envy that bordered on respect, and Jennie-Sue made up flagrantly exaggerated stories of the fairy princess life Liza-Jane was living, and about which she wrote ecstatic letters home.

When Nora had given up hope that she would see Grady again, or that he would make any effort to see her, she came back across the dark backyard late one evening, carrying her two brimming buckets of milk, to see headlights coming up the lane. Her heart rose smotheringly in her breast, and she stumbled in her haste to put down the milk buckets before her shaking hands spilled their contents.

When she saw Grady step out of the car, in the glow of the headlights, she had to fight to conquer her crazy impulse for flight. She

forced herself to stand still and wait as he came striding towards her across the yard, out of the light and into the shadows where she stood on the rickety porch steps.

"Howdy, Nora," he said.

"Howdy," she managed around the congestion in her throat. "Won't you come in and set a spell?"

"Thanks," said Grady and followed her into the house.

Granny, patting hoe-cake into a sizzling hot frying pan, looked up and saw Grady. She stopped her work, staring at him as though she had never set eyes on him before, and then she burst out curtly, "Well, you took your time getting here."

"I've been pretty busy," Grady defended himself.

"I reckon you have, but that ain't no reason you got to forget all your friends," Granny scolded him tartly.

Grady took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair, grinning at her wearily. "Do you know something, Granny? There are times when I wonder if I have any friends left!"

Granny eyed him fiercely. "Well, I must say you got a point there," she said sharply.

"Granny, I want to talk to Nora alone for a minute. Would you mind?" asked Grady.

Granyn shot him a startled glance, thrust the frying pan with its small corn pones back from the heat and turned towards the door, even as Nora cried out shakily, "Don't go, Granny. Ain't nothing he got to say to me I ain't willing for you to hear."

Granny snorted. "I declare to goodness, Nora, there are times when you seem to me a great gawk of a gal without sense enough to come in out of a rainstorm." She went out and banged the door shut behind her.

Nora stood gripping the back of a chair, while Grady looked down at her gravely. "I've been doing a lot of thinking, Nora," he began.

"What about?" Her voice was little more tahn a whisper.

"About you, Nora, and me, and—Dexter," he said, and his voice rasped slightly on the last. "That night at the pounding when Dexter was arrested and Liza-Jane came out with the news that he had fathered a child on her, I saw the way you looked at him. He'd had you, too, hadn't he?"

Her eyes fell away from his, and the color that poured into her face was a blazing, painful tide. She could not answer him in words, but, of course, she did not have to. He knew the answer.

"I was pretty sick, I admit, Nora," he said. "And then I realized that you must have loved him very much to—give him that."

"I hated his guts!" Nora said through clenched teeth.

Grady looked at her sternly. "Then why did you let him make love to you?" he demanded.

"Love!" Her mouth made an ugly curl about the word, turning it into an epithet. "There was no love about it. He didn't make like there was. He knew I purely despised him."

Grady said, puzzled and bitter, "Then why in the name of all that's sane, did you let it happen?"

She looked up at him then, and for the first time since he had been left alone with her, she met his eyes squarely. "To get money to take Julie to the hospital," she said.

Grady's brows drew together in a swift frown. "But, Nora, I got the money for you—," he reminded her.

"He backed out on me. Because I was fool enough to trust him when he said he'd give me the money if I'd—let him do what he wanted to do. Then afterwards, he said he didn't have the money there, but he'd get it for me. Then, when Doc Barlow said Julie could get in the hospital, and I went to git the money from him, he—laughed at me and said—I wasn't worth it!"

Grady swore a lurid oath, his face savage with fury.

Nora listened appraisingly to his words and then she nodded. "I reckon so," she said judiciously. "Reckon there ain't no more you could call him, but he's all of that."

"And all the time, he was slipping around with Liza-Jane!" said Grady at last. "I wish I'd known all that before I turned him over to the law. Of course, they'll hang him, but that's too good for him."

"I reckon it is," said Nora wearilly, "but it's a heap sight better than you getting in trouble for taking the law in your own hands by whipping hell out of him. You'd most likely have killed him, if you'd have known."

"I most likely would," Grady admitted. "And the law would have thanked me. It would have saved them a lot of bother and expense."

Nora's smile was so faint it was no more than a grimace, like the flicker of sunlight on a cloudy day, touching a frozen landscape for a bare instant.

"What kind of talk is that for the sheriff to be making?" she drawled. "I tried to shoot him that night, and you wouldn't let me."

Grady was silent for a moment, and then he said awkwardly,

hesitant to put the question, the answer to which seemed to him so terribly important, "How many times–?"

Her mouh twisted with bitterness. "Only once, and only to get the money for Julie. I hated him so bad I'd have died if I had to let him touch me again."

Grady drew a deep breath before he said huskily, "You came to me once, Nora–."

"That was different! That was beautiful and–and–wonderful–." She caught her breath, and her voice stumbled to silence before the sudden glory in his eyes.

"It didn't make you hate me, darling?" he asked, very low.

Once more she met his eyes, and what he saw in hers made him want to shout for joy.

"Reckon I couldn't never hate you, Grady Kilburn," she said on a breath so low that only the depth of her sincerity gave it strength.

"Nora, Nora–darling Nora!" His voice shook as he reached for her and felt her come into his arms with joy and gladness, that told him all that he wanted, or needed to know.

THE END

NORA HAD GOOD REASON TO DISTRUST MEN . . .

. . . But she wasn't made to do it for long. She was too beautiful, too lonely running the farm after her father died, too vibrant with the warmblooded love-hunger which was her heritage. Scorn them though she tried, men were a necessity to her, and both Grady Kilburn, the local boy who spoke her own language, and Jim Dexter, the slick and handsome stranger from the city, were able to prove it to her, each in his own way. Passionate, willful, determined to make her own life on the farm, Nora found herself the center of conflict between two strong and imperious men, in a battle that raged like a storm over Pilcher's Valley.

(Specially posed by professional model)

VENUS BOOKS