

FLAME IN THE FOREST by Harold Titus

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CHAPTER IX

FOR a week Kerry Young made maps, sitting in the office with Nan Downer for hours each day.

Sometimes long intervals would pass without a word being exchanged. Again, she would go to him abruptly with some question and her manner would betray her profound respect for his judgment. He had said that he could do many things in and about the woods; she learned the truth of his statement. Intelligent as she was, well as she had been trained by her far-sighted father, flaws had developed in her procedure, errors in judgment had gone undetected.

Young did not force his opinions, did not offer advice. But when she brought matters to his attention in which he discovered flaws he pointed these out.

Daily he assumed stature, and importance to her undertaking.

"You're right again!" she cried once. "You're always right. It's you who should be running this job."

"Me, take root?" he laughed. "Me, settled down in one place?"

"Why not?" she challenged and, curiously, he asked that of himself.

Tip rose then from his place beneath the drawing-board and muzzled Nan's knee, which made it unnecessary to pursue that question further.

"I must run down to the mill for a half hour," she said.

The dog watched her prepare to depart.

"Want to go, Tip?" Young asked. The dog wagged an affirmative. "All right, then; go along."

Nan stood in the doorway, watching. The retriever apparently could not believe this order to follow another. "Go on!" Kerry said. "Go with Nan!" And doggishly dumfounded with Nan he went, close to other heels for the first time since puppyhood.

It became a little game between the three. Whenever Nan went out Tip gave evidence of wanting to go, but always he awaited Young's order before following. And once, when the girl had crossed to the Landing to send a telegram and was urgently wanted by telephone, Kerry scrawled a note, gave it to the dog and told him to find Nan. . . . He did, after much running here and there and snuffing at the ground, and it would have been difficult to determine which was the more pleased, girl or dog.

"You'll finish tomorrow," Nan said, looking over Kerry's shoulder. "Can I get you to make next a new cruise of the stuff northwest of Townline lake?"

"You can get me," he said with odd soberness, "to try to do about anything you want done."

The words gave him a strange giddy feeling.

"We'll go tomorrow morning, then," she replied, overlooking his inference.

With a canoe on a trailer behind her car, they drove to the end of the road which gave access to Townline lake. Then they set off on that body of water to spend the day making a swift reconnaissance of the country in which Young was to work.

A family of ducks swam before them, ruffling the placid surface. The mother's head was raised high, she uttered low quacks of warning and the brood clustered close about her. As the canoe drew closer, the old one took wing and the youngsters, doing their best, skittered along the water, half flying, half swimming, making a great to-do.

A little breeze arose and the lake, which had lain like a burnished plate of steel, was touched to life. Lobes of light blue appeared, turned to indigo, and ran together until the body of water lay like a great sap-

phire, flecked with emerald islands. An eagle soared majestically above and as they rounded a point a deer, having late breakfast in the shallows, lifted its head in quick alarm and loped noisily for cover.

"Water's cold," Young remarked, trailing a hand.

"Like ice! This lake is terribly deep in the channels. The Indians say it never gives up its dead, and Father said that was probably so."

Young's eyes held on Nan's competent shoulders, watching their rhythmic swing. Her voice came back to him talking of the job, but he caught only the music of it. Why, he told himself, the thing that had made of him a wanderer was gone! He had at last found an answer to his doubt of responsibility for ruining old Jack Snow. Knowing that, why wander farther? Why not take root . . . and here? Surely Nan Downer was the most lovely, the most . . .

"We'll land here," she was saying, breaking off this wild train of thought. "I can see the corner stake. Father had a survey made three years ago."

They landed. Nan produced a map, and spread it on a log.

"Here we are. Right here. This creek—Otter—is alive with trout, and beaver ponds make it splendid fly-fishing, which is what the sort of folks who might buy will want. There are bass and other fish galore in the lake. One of the best yarding areas for deer in the country runs down into Section Twelve, here. There are some moose too, and plenty of grouse.

"This happens," she continued, "to be the northwestern corner of our holdings. The road we used today is the only one that comes close. There's no one at all in the country beyond. Tod West knows it like a book and I guess he's the only white man alive who does."

Tod West. The name struck temper within Young. Tod West, who had ruined one he loved in boyhood; who now sought to ruin one he perhaps was to love in maturity.

Little did Kerry reckon in that moment that Nan's idle remark connecting West and that vast lonely country beyond them would one day come back to him, would pound in his ears with the rush of fevered blood, that he would fight a fog of sickness and pain to remember it . . . to remember that none but Tod West knew those vast swamps and untracked uplands!

They went on. A covey of half-grown grouse fluttered out of the way, not particularly alarmed. A spotted fawn ran before them and a spruce hen stared stupidly from a low limb. Bear sign showed in the game trail and a wolf had passed that way last night. Off to the right sounded a sudden tremendous crashing which could only have been a moose, making away from man, his worst enemy.

Here was an old burning where lightning had started fire. Wild grasses and firewood abounded and Young stopped, watching bees work in the brilliant blossoms.

He was about to go on when a small movement on the ground attracted him; he stooped and gently put down one hand, palm cupped, and rising showed Nan a bee crawling upon his fingers.

"Pig!" he chided. "He's loaded up so heavily that he can't fly! Go on! Try it from here!" He waved his hand and the bee took wing, going slowly and groggily, but with that aid finally making a successful attempt at flight.

He stooped over again, watching another busy worker.

"Pretty fair Italians," he said. "Not pure; hybrids, but they look like right good honey-makers."

"Are you among other things, a bee expert?" Nan laughed.

"No, but once I had to live for a while with an old codger who kept 'em. That was about the best time I had when I was a kid. I got real clubby with bees . . . liked 'em. When I get so old I can't ramble any more maybe I'll settle down and keep 'em and let 'em keep me!"

"Is that the only plan you have?" He straightened and looked at her so intently that she flushed.

"Maybe not," he said gravely. "I'll know before long."

Later they stood shoulder to shoulder, waiting for the compass to come to rest that they might be certain of precise directions, eyes of each on the swinging dial. Nan's breath was a caress for Kerry's cheek and his hands began to tremble.

A few days earlier he would have laughed at this reaction but now he simply moved without explanation and placed the compass on a boulder where it would have stability.

"That hemlock stub is due north—"

"Sh!"

Young cut off her words with the low warning, making no movement.

"Wait!" he whispered. "Something coming. Hear it?"

The girl did not, at first, but after a moment of strained listening nodded her head silently.

Something was coming their way, slowly, perhaps hesitantly. Then, as a breath of breeze stirred the foliage, blowing from them to the direction from which the sounds came, that approach became more rapid.

Hoof beats and scrapings of brush and finally a queer, inquiring grunt or two.

"Oh!" Nan whispered as it came into view. "Moose calf! . . . Why . . . he's coming up to us!"

Indeed, it seemed as if the creature would run them down. It came on, head up, ears stiff, emitting a series of low sounds, picking up its feet awkwardly with the long, gangling legs; great, dark eyes fast on those two humans.

"Why! He'll . . ." Nan caught at Kerry's elbow as the calf kept on, never slackening its pace and so close that in another stride or two they might have touched it.

But on the movement the animal swerved, half turned away, swung off to the right and stopped facing them, standing there all rigid attention and wonder.

The short tail twitched, the nostrils quirked. Young's elbow pressed Nan's hand warningly to his side. They stood motionless as the moose continued to stare at them, making those plaintive, inquiring sounds.

Kerry could feel the girl tremble and that sent a tremor through his own body.

He began to imitate the sound the calf made and on that the creature backed off a few steps, seeming frightened. But when the man did not move it resumed its own grunts, as if doing its best to bridge the barrier between species and talk.

"What the dickens are you?" he seemed to be trying to say. "Where do you come from? Why are you here?"

"I never smelled or saw anything like you two in all my born days! I'm kind of afraid of you, but I want to give you a good once-over before I hit for yonder! There's so much for a young feller like me to run across for the first time!"

For over a minute the calf stood there, using all its sense to size up that man and that woman. And then, probably as an instinctive mistrust of anything so widely at variance with all its other young experience asserted itself, began to back. The retreat at first was or-

derly, a slow, backward stepping. Then it turned sideways and broke into a trot, went faster. Once it stopped and cast an apprehensive glance over its shoulder and after that, dropped its ears and disappeared at a lumbering but flowing trot.

"Why! Why, of all things!" breathed Nan, withdrawing her hand from Young's arm.

The man laughed.

"Never saw it before!" he said. "But in the woods, if you use your eyes, you see plenty for the first time." He laughed lowly.

"His first encounter with man scent, you see. He wined us from wherever he was and curiosity made him come our way. Likely, he's never been molested in all his couple of months on earth and so he doesn't know much about fear."

"Tough, isn't it, that every species has its predator enemies and has to start learning how to defend itself by the law of claw and fang before it has a good chance to enjoy such a swell world?"

"Yes. It's tough," she replied and looked with a peculiar intimacy into his face. "There's so much to enjoy if only all of us would!"

They started on and after a time Kerry spoke bluntly the thing that her last words had left in his mind.

"The moose did me a favor. He frightened you a little and made



There's No One at All in the Country Beyond.

you touch me. . . . That was a downright enjoyable experience."

"Please!"

"But you understand, don't you that I mean that? It's not just a string of words?"

"Yes. And, because of that . . . Please!"

"Right! . . . This is the best stand of maple I've seen in this country. Look at the bird's-eye tree, there. Two good veneer logs in it."

It was late afternoon when they beached the canoe on their return.

"We've time to look at the cabin now," Nan told him, nodding toward the log structure on the high bank; and she led the way.

Beside the door was a rack of implements for use in fighting fires. The door itself was unlocked. "My father didn't like locks. In the bush," she explained. "Our men use this camp some but they always leave it open so anyone in need of shelter can get in."

The place was amply furnished, blankets on the bunks, insect nets hanging above them; cooking utensils and a goodly supply of unperishable staples on shelves above the stove.

"It's a snug camp," Nan said. "You'll be comfortable here, Kerry."

He scratched a temple thoughtfully.

"D'you mind if I use my own outfit?"

"Why, no! Don't you fancy this camp?"

"Oh, it's got shingles and glass in

it. I'd rather set up myself on one of those islands."

"Certainly, if you want it that way. I used to come here with my father, but now the place has been a little spoiled for me. . . . You see, Holt stayed here alone the night Father was killed and if it hadn't been for wise old Ezra he'd have been carted in to jail and held there for a while."

"You think a lot of Holt, don't you?"

"Of course! Why shouldn't I? He's the most loyal boy in the world. He's worked his head off for me."

"Anybody would," he said. . . . Other cars were there when they drove up to headquarters. One was Ezra Adams' battered roadster and the old doctor looked up from tinkering with the motor in a way which commanded Kerry's interest.

But Nan, with a wave to Ezra, was more intent on the group about the other.

"Oh, there's Mr. Dexter, up from Chicago!" she said excitedly. "That means he's ready to close!" Her face clouded. "And day before yesterday I mailed Tod West a formal request for permission to deed that section. It's our first chance at a real sale. Oh, I hope it won't be blocked!"

"Who's sick, Ezra?" Young asked, as Nan walked rapidly on to greet the others.

"Nobody much, except this 'arnal motor!" he said loudly. Then, with caution: "Come close, Kerry! Stick your head down here with me, like you were trying to help me tinker at somethin'."

"The bullet that killed Cash," he whispered, "was fired from Tod West's pistol!"

For a moment Young did not reply; a savage triumph swept him, followed by a sinking sensation. Tod West, the slayer of Nan's father and, perhaps, the slayer of her hopes as well! He knew that even despite her misgivings, the girl was hoping that West would be generous enough to permit her to close the deal which this evening seemed to be in prospect. And it was such a forlorn hope.

"Well," he said, "that gives us a course to steer, Ezra!"

"What's the first move?"

"To watch him. What else can we do? If he's started using that money, he'll keep on; anyhow, that's a good bet. We've got to locate it before we tip our hand."

"But suppose he suspects and lights out?"

Kerry twisted his head doubtfully.

"He won't light out so long as there's a hope left. All he has worked and schemed and killed for is in this country. A man of his age doesn't run away from it so long as there's a chance of hanging on."

"Now, I can get Jim Hinkle to trail him. He won't suspect Jim. That can be fixed up. With me out of the picture for a few days, maybe he'll feel more free to act. I'll see to it that plenty of folks know I'm to be gone for a while."

"I swear it's going to be up to you, son!" the old man said. "I get all fluttery inside, now, thinking about what might happen . . . and about what you and I've got to make happen!"

Nan Downer sat disconsolately at her desk that evening. The man Dexter and his companions had gone from the dinner-table down to the river. Soon they would return and want to talk business . . . and as yet she was not able to talk in conclusive terms.

She had been conscious for a moment of another's presence, but did not look up at once. When she did, it was into the flushed face of Tod West.

"Oh!" she cried, and rose quickly from her chair.

"Surprised, eh?" he asked and stepped closer. "Why surprised? I got a letter from you yesterday."

Now, she caught the reek of whisky on his breath.

"Well, you want my answer now?" he taunted.

(TO BE CONTINUED)