

The Hooked Hand

When Matilda Persephone Cumberland was a teenager, before she ever met her future husband, Gerald Thistlethwaite, she attended high school in the small Northern California town of Red Rock. Her life was much like that of others of her generation in the late fifties, with days revolving around schoolwork, family, church activities and dating. Like most small towns of the day, Red Rock offered few activities for their burgeoning teenage population beyond the drive-in movie, the hamburger stand, school or church functions and the streets.

Almost all teenage boys of driving age had access to a car on Friday and Saturday night. After treating a date to a milkshake, burger and fries, or a third-run movie at the drive-in, the place to be was Lovers' Lane.

In Red Rock, this lovey-dovey location was the old dirt road running along the base of the rocky foothills not far from the town. Youngsters parking alongside this farm and ranch access road at night seldom encountered other vehicles, besides those who were also seeking a bit of privacy to do a little cuddling and 'necking', away from the prying, censorious eyes of parents and neighbors. Although the single County Sheriff's deputy patrolling the area may occasionally interrupt an amorous interlude, a little embarrassment and the inconvenience of driving to another spot were a small price to pay for an hour or so of romance under the stars.

One particular late summer night, Matilda, Tillie as she was called, still a sophomore, had been asked out on a date by dreamy senior class president, Butch Marsden, captain of the football and basketball teams and long-time crush of Matilda and all the other underclass girls. Tillie was over the moon from the honor. She'd agonized over which poodle skirt and twin set to wear with her new patent leather flats. Saddle shoes and bobby sox would not do for a date with Butch Marsden.

When he'd parked out front, tooted the horn for her, and she'd started to run out, Tillie's father held her back. She watched, mortified, as her father walked out to the boy's two-toned Dodge sedan and 'invited' him into the house. She hadn't died during her parents' inquisition of her date, even though she had prayed silently for God to send a chariot to carry her away from the embarrassing scene.

Once in the car, she'd apologized profusely for her Neanderthal parents, but Butch laughed it off.

"You've got to humor the old parties, now and then, to keep them docile," he'd joked and Tillie had laughed, too loud and too long.

She'd been disappointed when Butch didn't stop at the hamburger stand for dinner with the usual gang of kids, but, instead, drove directly to the drive-in theater and pulled up next to a speaker in the farthest row from the screen. Tillie would have preferred to be closer to the snack bar and restrooms. She hated walking between rows of parked cars during the movie to take care of necessities. However, she wasn't about to make waves on the date of a lifetime. She was mentally composing entries for her diary when Butch's arm snaked behind her on the car seat, startling her.

“You’re a jumpy little thing, ain’t ya?” Butch laughed. “You afraid I’m going to bite you?” he added with a leer.

Tillie giggled and shifted toward the car door. “Of course not. That’s silly,” she managed to say.

“Just relax, little one,” Butch said, pulling her closer and lifting her chin. “I’ll go get us snacks. Want some popcorn and a coke?”

Tillie nodded and he left the car.

“Don’t be such a silly goose!” she admonished herself. She needed to relax, like Butch said, and enjoy this special night. She was new at this, that’s all, and hadn’t dated any upper classmen. In fact, this was her first time in a car without at least one other couple. She usually hung out with a whole circle of friends from her own class.

“They will be so jealous when I tell them about my date with Butch!” she said aloud, bolstering her courage.

She took advantage of Butch’s absence to check her hair in the mirrored compact she carried in her purse and saw a hank of hair had escaped the scarf tied around her ponytail.

When Butch slid into the car and was readjusting the speaker on his door, Tillie excused herself to go to the ladies’ room in the snack bar to fix her hair.

Walking back to the car was daunting, as it was fully dark. The movie previews had begun. She hurried and accidentally knocked the speaker off another car as she passed. She put it back, attempting to apologize, but the couple inside had moved to the car’s backseat and paid no attention to anything beyond exploring one another.

Tillie averted her eyes and made her way back, blushing furiously.

“What took you so long? Didja fall in?” Butch greeted her.

“Sorry. I got sorta lost on the way back. It’s really dark this far from the snack bar.”

“Yeah, that’s the point,” Butch said, again putting his arm around her.

When he leaned toward her, Tillie grabbed the bag of popcorn and crammed a handful into her mouth and turned her head.

“Oh look,” she said when she could speak. “The show’s starting. I hope it’s a good one.”

“Nah, it’s just some third-rate horror. See, it’s called “The House of Usher.” How good can it be if it’s about a stupid house? Let’s get into the back and make ourselves comfortable.”

“Uh, well, uh, I don’t think I can see the movie from back there. I’m not as tall as you. I wouldn’t be able to see over the front seats and everything, tilted up like we are.”

Butch looked annoyed. Tillie thought he was going to insist, but instead, he shook his head, turned to face the steering wheel and focused on the movie.

The movie may have been third rate, but Vincent Price gave Tillie a first-rate scare with his creepy voice and mannerisms. When the house sank into the ground and the film credits rolled she found herself limp after the intense experience.

“Okay, that’s over, now the main event,” Butch said, starting up the engine. They joined the other cars making their way out of the drive-in, but instead of turning back toward town, Butch headed in the direction of the foothills and Lovers’ Lane.

Nervous and not knowing what to say, Tillie asked if she could turn on the radio.

“Yeah, good idea. Find something romantic,” Butch said.

As Tillie turned the dial, trying to find popular music, she stopped at a station giving a public service announcement.

“...the escaped mental patient is considered to be very dangerous. Do not approach. We repeat: a patient at the local hospital for the criminally insane has escaped and is believed to be in this area. The man is extremely large, bald, has a hook for a hand and goes by the name of Tor Johnson. If you see this man do not approach and report any sightings to the proper authorities immediately. We now return you to the music of Jumpin’ Joe’s Rock and Roll Hour.”

“There’s an escaped mental patient around here, Butch. Don’t you think we should go right home?” Tillie asked.

Butch shook his head.

“That radio station is twenty miles away. They don’t mean the guy’s around here.”

Tillie didn’t argue, but the announcement had added to her growing unease at Butch’s behavior all evening.

When he pulled off the dirt road into a well-worn depression under an oak tree, she finally got the nerve to speak.

“Why did you ask me out, Butch?” she asked, without looking at him. She hoped so hard he would tell her he’d noticed her at school and liked her personality or anything to allay her suspicions.

“What do you mean?” he asked. “Why do you think a guy asks a girl out?”

“Because he likes her and would like to get to know her better?” she asked.

“Yeah. That’s right. Cause he wants to get to know her lots better,” he said, pulling her to him.

Tillie pushed him away, but he was twice her size. She was struggling when she saw something move across the back window.

“What was that?” she cried out, startling Butch into pausing in his attempt to pull up her sweater.

“It’s nothin’, come on! Stop playing hard to get. Cripes! I wouldn’t of asked you out if I thought you were gonna be so standoffish. You frigid, or something?”

“What?!” Tillie asked, sitting up straight and backing against the door.

“You go to church, right?” Butch said. “The guys all said you Bible thumpers are mad for it.”

Tillie completely forgot the escapee in her anger and indignation.

“So, that’s why you didn’t even take me for a hamburger? You thought I’d jump into the backseat with you at the movie? What’s the matter with you?”

Once she got started, her anger carried her away and Tillie vented all her rage and disappointment on the confused young man.

“How could I have ever thought a date with you was an honor. Why, you are the biggest creep in the whole school. Take me home and never speak to me again,” she ended her tirade.

Butch fumbled with the car keys and tried to start the engine. In his agitation, he flooded it and the car wouldn’t start.

“Never mind, then, I’ll walk home. Anything to get away from you.”

She had her hand on the door handle, when a shiny hook clanged onto the open window frame.

Tillie screamed and Butch jumped out and ran at breakneck speed down the dirt road. Other cars hidden along the roadside flipped on their lights. Tillie saw the silhouette of her date as he ran in a panic past them all.

A large bald head appeared in the window.

Tillie couldn't speak. She was paralyzed with fear; hypnotized by the eyes of the madman looking into hers.

The huge man pulled himself to his feet and she could see his hospital pajamas as his head soared out of her sight. He lumbered around the vehicle to the driver's side, she thought about escaping out the passenger door and running after Butch, but she couldn't make her limbs obey.

The escapee slipped behind the wheel of Butch's car and turned the key while depressing the gas pedal to the floor. The car roared to life.

He turned to Tillie with a smile and said, "Car was only flooded. Stupid kid. You are better off without him. You are a good girl, I can tell."

He tipped Tillie's chin up with his hook, leaned toward her and planted a kiss on her forehead before slipping out of the car and disappearing into the darkness.

Tillie sat listening to the idling engine while her heart-rate slowed.

"Wow, this was a night full of surprises," she thought.

People aren't always what they seem.