

Nate Forrest

The Hillbilly
Gangster

H. Wayne Smith

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1***October, 1932***

A raw lake wind whips across the fairways of Chicago's Evergreen Golf Course, off Western Avenue. I have an urgent message for one of the players, and a clubhouse boy tells me I can find him somewhere on the back nine. All the sensible golfers have long since retreated to the bar, so it's easy to find my man on the twelfth tee.

As I come near, he reaches into his golf bag. But he doesn't draw out a driver. Instead he yanks a Thompson submachine gun from a special pocket. Then he aims his rock-steady at a spot between my eyes. Behind the Thompson's ugly snout, the hard, cold eyes of Machine Gun Jack McGurn glint at me dispassionately.

Just then my Pa's words – his last bit of advice before I left my home in the Big Thicket of Texas – echo in my head. "Don't you go up there to Chicago and get

your fool self killed.” Right now it looks like it just might happen. Pa will be disappointed in me.

“Take it easy,” I tell Jack. “I’m just a messenger boy.”

“From who, kid?” McGurn growls with a thick Sicilian accent, which doesn’t go with his name. I’d been told that McGurn is an alias he’d picked up when he was a boxer and it was easier for Irishmen to get bouts than Italians.

From the corner of my eye I catch a smirk on the pouty mouth of Jack’s golf partner, a tall, well-proportioned blonde who can only be Louise Rolfe, the famous “blonde alibi” whose testimony had kept Jack out of jail when the feds nabbed him for masterminding the Saint Valentine’s Day Massacre.

I try to keep my voice calm, but it’s not easy with a machinegun shoved in my face. “Gus Winkler sent me.”

“What’s your name?” McGurn says.

“Nate Forrest,” I answer. “Maybe you’ve heard of me.”

“It don’t ring a bell,” he says.

“Gus calls me ‘Hillbilly’,” I respond.

“Hillbilly, eh? Come to think of it . . .

.”

I’m still in the crosshairs. “Why don’t you put the artillery away, Jack? If that thing goes off, it’ll attract a lot of attention.”

But McGurn keeps the Thompson trained on my skull a while longer. Now he's testing me, so I just stand there and stare at him with as much calm as I can muster. Finally he relents and stuffs the weapon back into his golf bag. I breathe easier. It looks like I won't get my fool self killed today.

"Well?" Jack says. "What's the message?"

I hand him a folded-over note and he slips off a fancy kidskin golf glove to open it. Most men don't wear them, but Jack's a natty dresser. A diamond pinky ring glitters in the sun. Most men don't wear those, either. He studies the note for a moment and then tears it to bits. Without a word he wafts the pieces into the wind, and they blow all over the fairway. He nods and I know I'm dismissed.

As I turn to go, I ask, "How's your game?" Jack is a decent golfer and owns a stake in the Evergreen course.

"I'm seven over par," he replies with a frown. "Lousy wind."

As I walk away, the gale carries Louise's words to me. "That kid talks funnier than you do, Jack." Everybody seems to notice my Texas twang.

Suddenly all hell breaks loose. A heavy shot booms to my left and I throw myself flat on the turf. Four or five of Frank Nitti's boys – I recognize them all –

charge out from behind trees that line the fairway. They blaze away at Jack and pump their shotguns as they run.

What happens next is like a dream in slow motion. I look toward Jack. He whips out the Thompson while Louise screams and dives for cover. A short burst spouts from Jack's gun. A head explodes like a melon.

A second guy backpedals. He swings his shotgun toward me and works the action. I guess I was wrong. I'm about to get my fool self killed today, after all.

My hand closes on the army automatic in my waistband. I draw it out. Time slows down even more. I notice the contrast of pearl handle against black metal. I aim without thinking. The big Colt barks. The gunman crashes to the ground. What's left of Nitti's boys turn tail and run. They've had enough.

I dash to where my man lies and see where the bullet struck – squarely between the eyes. It blew off the back of his skull when it came out.

Jack rushes up, smoking Thompson in one hand and golf bag in the other. With a big grin he says, "Good shooting, country boy." Then he drops the bag and commences to pump my hand like a Texas oil well.

My heart throbs and my head swims. "Just like shooting squirrels, back

home,” I reply mechanically. “We always hit ‘em in the head.

Jack stops pumping and stares at me.

“That way we don’t spoil any meat.”

Jack continues to stare at me. I guess he didn’t expect to hear that. I didn’t expect to say it either. The words just popped out of my mouth. Funny what sticks in your mind when you grow up poor and shells for your squirrel gun cost four cents apiece.

Louise brushes away the grass she’d collected on her dive to the ground and strolls up to survey the carnage. Cool and collected she says, “You boys sure don’t waste any bullets.” Then she gives Jack a little shove in the direction of the clubhouse. “Come on, honey, let’s beat it before the cops get here.” As Louise prances away, she gives me a wink and a big, toothy smile as she says, “You’d better get a move on, too, kid.”

While I stand over the man I killed, the gravity of what I’ve done falls on me like a thousand bricks. I saw this guy just last week, drinking and eating with his pals at Tommy O’Day’s saloon, where I work nights. I feel numb inside, but not remorseful. If I hadn’t plugged him, I’d be sprawled on the grass, my carcass full of buckshot.

Then a dark thought settles over me. Somehow I know this isn't the last man I'll have to kill. I never signed up for this.

The police will be here soon, and I need to get moving. But I can't. I'm rooted to the spot. I don't know what was in that note, but one thing's for sure. It almost got me killed.

2

***April, 1932 – Seven Months
Earlier***

I've just turned twenty-four when I step off a Burlington connecting train in Chicago. I'm a tall, raw-boned country boy from the East Texas backwoods. Yes, Texas has backwoods hidden away in the huge tracks of pine forest that cover the eastern part of the state. I'm from Polk County, smack in the middle of the Big Thicket.

It's been a long trip, and I'm tired and hungry as I stride onto the platform, all my worldly possessions in a beat up duffel bag slung over my shoulder. As I wander toward the main hall, I drink in the bustle of Union Station, with its teeming crowds and high, vaulted ceiling. Beams of sunlight stream in through latticed windows. My determined footsteps ring on the marble floor. I'm awed by this place, which seems like a city unto itself.

All of a sudden, a guy in a decent suit approaches me. He wears his hat pushed jauntily back on his head and a cigarette dangles carelessly from his lips. Back home, the only men who wear suits are the undertaker and the preacher. I figure this guy for neither.

“Hey country boy,” he says.

I guess it’s easy to size me up.

“Looking for work?”

“Sure,” I say, curious about what the guy has in mind. It occurs to me that he’s the first Yankee I’ve ever met.

The country is reeling under the Depression, and everyone’s told me that it will be just as hard to find work up North as it is in Texas. But I never believed them. That’s why, when my logging job played out, I spent nearly all of my worldly fortune on a train ticket to Chicago. And now I’m about to prove that the people back home were wrong. Here’s a guy ready to offer me a job the moment I arrive.

“You look like you’ve got some muscle on you,” he says as he grabs me by the elbow and steers me toward a door on the far side. “That’s just what we need. Come on, I’ll take you to my office and we’ll get you set up.”

As I open my mouth to ask what kind of job he has in mind, I spy a dark-haired girl in an expensive-looking, though well-worn, coat and a little red hat. She holds a cardboard suitcase in one hand and stares at me like I just came from some other planet.

The sight of her slows me down, and the guy says, "Come on, we don't have all day."

Now to my immense surprise, the girl stalks over to us and stops right in the Yankee's face. She sets the suitcase down and puts her hands on her hips. "Hello Joe," she says with a penetrating stare. "Got another sucker?"

The guy turns livid. "Beat it, Rachel," he says. "This ain't your business." He tries to nudge me along with a little shove.

But the girl has my attention, and I don't budge. I give her a questioning look.

"Did this rat promise you a job?" she asks. Before I can answer, she says, "Of course he did."

Joe mutters something under his breath and beats a hasty retreat toward the exit. That leaves me standing face to

face with the formidable Rachel, whoever she is.

“He said . . .” I begin.

“Be glad I came along,” she interrupts.

I peer at her closely and find that I’m glad indeed. She’s not very tall and she’s more than a little too thin. But even so I can picture her as a goddess of the silver screen – worn clothes and all – with dark hair tumbling in silky waves about her shoulders and brown, lustrous eyes that capture mine without a fight. There’s something else about her, too – an earnestness or intensity – that grabs hold of me and won’t let go.

As she continues in a rapid Hollywood-style staccato, it’s a little hard to wrap my southern ears around her words. “In case you haven’t figured it out by now, he didn’t have a job for you,” she says. “He hangs out here all the time and scores off bumpkins like you who’ve just arrived in town.”

I’m not sure I like being called a bumpkin, especially by a girl like her, and she reads it in my face.

“This is the big city, country boy. You have to be careful who you trust. He was about to take you around the corner . . .”

“He said we’d go to his office.” By now I’ve caught on. “But of course . . .”

“Right. He doesn’t have an office. His pals are waiting outside.” She points toward the exit where Joe had gone out. “They’d have rolled you for whatever you have. People like you get off the train with a few dollars in their pocket to make a fresh start. That’s the racket those guys work. They take your dough, grandpa’s gold watch and anything else you have. All they leave you with is a cracked skull.”

I ask her how she knows all this.

“I live around here. I’ve seen it before and I didn’t want it to happen again. Besides, you look like a lost puppy. I couldn’t live with myself if I hadn’t stepped in.”

Lost puppy?

She steps back and sizes me up. “What’s your name, and where are you from, anyway?”

I tell her my name, a little bit about the Big Thicket and how the logging jobs had dried up and why I’d come to Chicago to make a new start. She doesn’t seem to get the idea of trees in Texas, but nonetheless listens with a bemused little smile – until I ramble for too long.

Then she cuts me off and asks, “Now that you’re here, what do you plan to do?”

“I’ll make the rounds until I find something,” I tell her confidently. “I can do plenty of things.” A strong, ambitious guy like me should be able to find work somewhere. I’m not worried.

“In other words,” she says, “you don’t have a plan.”

She hit the nail right on the head, and I feel pretty dumb all of a sudden.

She flashes that little smile again, puts her arm through mine and leads me toward the exit. “Come on, Hillbilly,” she says, “you’re gonna buy me dinner. You owe me that much.”

We head east from the station – I with my duffel bag and she with the cardboard suitcase – and cross South Wacker Drive and then the bridge over the river. We walk along East Jackson until we come to a diner she knows.

For a buck – pretty close to my last one – I buy hamburgers and coffee for both of us plus a chocolate milk shake and slice of apple pie for her. She tells me about herself while we eat.

Her name is Rachel White, she's twenty-one years old, and she came to Chicago from Seattle a little over a year ago. She's the oldest daughter in a big family. Her old man works for the streetcar company. She'd been thrown out of work and figured the best thing she could do was go someplace where she could make a fresh start, a lot like me. She'd barely been scraping by in the Windy City, landing short-lived jobs here and there and struggling to keep a roof over her head.

"That's why I was in Union Station today," she continues. "I had a room at the YWCA on La Salle, not far from here, and a part-time job in a dress shop." She frowns. "But the shop went belly-up and I now can't come up with the two-bit nightly fee for the Y."

Evidently she can't afford food either, judging by the way she wolfed down that burger. So she'd stashed her suitcase, filled with everything she owned, in a nickel-a-day Union Station locker while she hunted for work. She'd given up for the day and just retrieved her belongings when she ran into me.

As we clean up the last crumbs on our plates, I ask, "What's next?"

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I plan to take a walk over to the park, find a nice bench and think things over.”

Like she said, I have no plan at all. “Mind if I go with you?” I figure a stroll in the park with a pretty girl never hurt anybody.

She pushes back from the table and studies my face for a long time. She never changes her expression. She just stares at me. All the while, I can tell something is going on behind her big brown eyes.

“I’ll probably sleep on that park bench tonight,” she says at last.

So that’s her game. Just like the guy in the station, she wants my money. Disappointed, I pull out what little I have left and shove it across the table. “Here,” I say, “take this. It should put you up for a few nights.” I figure I owe her something after Union Station. After all, she saved me from a cracked skull.

For a moment she doesn’t say anything, but I see the color rise in her cheeks. Then her eyes flash and she throws the pitiful wad of bills in my face.

“Keep your money!” she says. Her voice shakes with anger. “I don’t want it.”

Then she gets to her feet, and I'm thoroughly confused.

"No, wait," I say while she stands over the table and glowers at me. I don't want her to go. "I owe you something for keeping my noggin intact." I mean it. I truly want to give the money to her.

Rachel mutters something about not owing her anything and thanks for dinner. Then with an exasperated huff, she turns on her heel. After she marches eight or ten steps toward the door, she hesitates, turns and then stomps back to the table to glare at me some more.

After a moment she deflates and slides back into her chair. Her voice sounds tired. "You just don't get it, do you?"

I sure don't.

Then she looks at me in a way that cuts all the way to the marrow. "I helped you because you needed it," she says softly. "Not because I wanted anything."

Those words and the look in those brown eyes make me feel pretty low. She's on the level.

"But you can't spend the night alone in the park," I protest.

"I won't be alone."

“That’s what I mean! That park will be full of . . .”

Rachel doesn’t let me finish. “Can I trust you, Nate Forrest?” she blurts. “I mean, really trust you?”

Now I realize what she’s been trying to read in my face all this time. I nod.

“You can trust me, too,” she says as she reaches across the table and, just for an instant, touches my hand. But the brush of her gentle fingers tingles on my skin for a long time.

“Okay,” she goes on, “On the one hand, you need somebody to show you the ropes. On the other, I don’t want to make myself a target for every hobo in Grant Park. So here’s what we’ll do. We’ll team up and sleep in the park. Just for tonight. You keep trouble away from me – you look like you can handle yourself – and I’ll think of some ways to help you get started in Chicago. You’re the brawn and I’m the brains. Then tomorrow we’ll go our separate ways.”

We cover the few blocks to the park. As we walk, I think about Rachel’s words, “You can trust me, too.” My gut tells me this is absolutely true and I want to believe her without reservation. She seems so

sincere. And besides, she's beautiful, which makes me want to trust her all the more. Nonetheless there's something about the situation – or maybe about Rachel – that raises a nagging little voice inside my head. The voice reminds me to be cautious. Trusting a big city woman I hardly know – especially a very pretty one – could be a ticket for disaster.

3

We find a good bench for Rachel and a comfortable nearby grass patch for me, which I much prefer to a hard wooden seat. Now, although I'm supposed to be a guard dog, I'm starting to look more like that lost puppy she mentioned earlier. Oh well, it'll be a warm night and I like sleeping under the stars.

As the shadows lengthen, we sit together on the bench and talk for a long time – actually, she talks and I listen. She gets excited with all kinds of ideas and chatters on about what she's learned in the past year. A lot of what she says is really helpful, but every now and then she throws in something to remind me how much smarter she is than me. I get a little irritated then – especially since she hardly knows me. How does she know how smart I may – or may not – be? I can hardly get a

word in edgewise. But the time passes more or less pleasantly and – too soon – the night turns pitch black.

About that time a little cop in a double-breasted blue uniform struts by. He'd intended to chase us away but changed his mind when he recognized Rachel.

“What are you doing here?” he says.

Rachel shoots back, “Do you really have to ask, Eddie?”

He takes in her cardboard suitcase – and me – and snorts a little laugh. “That bad, huh?”

“That bad,” she says. “I’m flat busted. Can’t even pay for a room at the Y.”

Eddie clucks his disapproval while he holds his nightstick behind his back with both hands, parallel to the ground. He bounces a little on his toes as he stands there, as if he needs to keep moving all the time. Then he turns his attention to me. “Who’s this?” he asks.

Rachel gives him a little spiel about who I am, how we met and why we’re spending the night together in the park. “You sure you can trust him?” he asks.

“He’s alright,” she replies.

He looks me over again. “Just make sure you take care of her,” he says. “This is no place for a woman at night.”

“She’ll be okay,” I answer.

“Don’t come back here tomorrow,” Eddie warns. “I’m doing you a big favor tonight by letting you stay here.” He gives me another once over. “At least I think I am.”

Rachel gives him a tired look. “Beat it, Eddie. Like I said, he’s okay. And believe me, I don’t intend to be here tomorrow.”

Eddie takes a few steps down the sidewalk and stops. “What are you gonna do next?”

Now Rachel’s voice matches her tired look. “I’ll figure something out.”

Before he disappears into the shadows, Eddie says, “I owe you one, Rachel, so here’s some friendly advice. If I was you, I’d go see Tommy O’Day.”

Once Eddie is gone I ask, “What does he mean, he owes you one? And who’s Tommy O’Day?” Her acquaintance with the cop makes me a little leery, and I wonder what kind of answers I’ll get.

Rachel laughs as she surveys the expression on my face. She reads me too

easily. But it's the first time I've heard her laugh, and I like the sound of it.

"Eddie," she says, "is a henpecked little guy who's always in trouble with his wife. She's a big, loud redhead about twice his size and clearly wears the pants in the family. I got him out of a jam with her once. That's all."

She answers my questioning look. "When I worked at the dress shop, I covered for him."

"And Tommy O'Day?"

"That's why I had to cover for him." She breathes a long sigh, like she doesn't really want to talk about it. "Okay, since you insist. Tommy runs a speakeasy over on West Roscoe Street. I used to date a guy who liked to go there."

"Date?" I ask. "How serious were you with this guy?"

"That's none of your business," she replies with a huff. "Do you want to hear about Eddie or not?"

I nod, sufficiently chagrined.

"Okay. Eddie was at Tommy's Club one night when he shouldn't have been. The next day, his wife drags him into the dress shop. That's always his atonement when he steps out of line. He has to buy

clothes for her. I don't know why. She never looks good in anything she puts on." Rachel shifts her weight on the hard bench. "But she was giving him more grief than he deserved, and I convinced her that he'd been on his beat the night before – just like he was supposed to be. They kissed and made up, and he got off light that day. Eddie has looked out for me ever since." Rachel gives a little laugh. "I don't see how he affords that woman." She pauses and her brows knit into a frown. "Well, actually I do."

She doesn't say anything else, and I don't ask any more questions. It's late and my eyelids are heavy. As a breeze blows in from the lake, we decide it's time for bed. That is, it's time for Rachel to curl up on the park bench and for me to stretch out on my grassy patch. I don't figure anybody will bother her with me nearby.

As I drift off, fuzzy thoughts course through my head about how I'd ended up in a park on the shore of Lake Michigan, sleeping on the ground near a girl I hardly know. But these thoughts drift quickly through my tired mind and I sleep like a log.

We wake with the dawn and strike out for Union Station to wash up and make ourselves presentable in the public washrooms. After that, I spring four bits for breakfast. That only leaves me with a couple of bucks left.

Then for hours we pound the streets in search of anything that might offer promise for either of us. Of course, all we do is use up a lot of shoe leather. Most of the businesses had long ago posted “No Work” signs in the windows. When we press the issue, we find they mean it.

Everywhere men loiter in the streets, down and out, ragged and desperate. Grimness has descended on the city. It’s so thick you can almost feel it in your bones.

I have to give Rachel a lot of credit. All morning long, she’s pointed me in likely directions, drawing on practically everyone she knows. And though she’s only been here a year, she knows a surprising number of people. She’s really making an effort to help me out. In fact she’s working harder for me than she is for herself. But I’m not having any more luck than she is. And she’s not having any.

By lunchtime we’re tired and hungry. We’ve tramped a wide circle and

find ourselves near Grant Park again, on South State Street. I see a long line of men outside one of the buildings across the road.

“That’s a soup kitchen,” Rachel tells me. I’d heard about them of course, but had never actually seen one.

“Al Capone started that one when he wanted to build up his public image – it was the first one in Chicago.”

I step off the curb and start toward the end of the line. Before I get two steps Rachel grabs me by the arm. “Where do you think you’re going?” she demands.

I’m a little annoyed at the way she latched onto me. “Come on,” I tell her. “Aren’t you hungry?”

She’s angry with me. “I’m not *that* hungry.” She nods toward the line of shuffling men. “Do you really want a handout?”

That makes me stop and think. I look again at the men in that line. I’ve never seen such a dispirited bunch – some tattered and dirty, others in fancy business suits, but all with the same vacant, hopeless stare. As much as I could use a bowl of stew right now, I know she’s right. I

don't want to end up on the dole like those guys. No handouts for me.

So we resume our walk and pretty soon find ourselves perched on our park bench again, no better off than yesterday. Well, actually we're worse off because I'm half a dollar poorer after breakfast, and Eddie will be by soon to run us off.

By now I'm discouraged. Maybe the folks back home were right after all. Life is no easier in the city. I point to my patch of grass, and say, "I don't want to sleep there tonight. I'll go down to the docks and see what I can find." A lot of trade comes into Chicago through Lake Michigan, and somebody has to unload the ships.

Rachel makes a wry face, the way she does when she thinks I've said something dumb. "The docks are union. They take care of their own down there – and there's not enough work to go around. They won't let you in."

We sit in silence for awhile. Then Rachel suddenly says, "We can stay at this game forever or try something riskier. Are you willing to take a chance?"

"Sure," I say with a resigned shrug. "What's playing it safe gained me so far?"

Besides, my feet are getting sore and I'm no closer to a job than I was yesterday.

"Okay," she says. "Tommy O'Day. We'll pay him a visit."

I'd forgotten about him.

Then she turns her brown eyes on me and bores in. "On second thought, you don't have to come with me. In fact, it's better if you don't."

That takes me by surprise. "Dumping me?"

When she puts her hand on my arm, her voice is surprisingly gentle. "No, it's not that. It's just that Tommy is . . . well . . . he has some shady customers."

Uh-oh. I was afraid of something like this. Although the end of Prohibition is on the horizon, there's still plenty of action in the liquor business. And action means trouble. I figure both will be easy to find at Tommy's bar.

"Do Al Capone's boys go there?" I ask.

"They're Frank Nitti's boys now that Capone's in jail. And yes, some of them go there – along with dirty cops like Eddie."

She tries to dissuade me from tagging along. But happily, I'm able to

convince her that I should go, and I don't even have to try very hard.

Tommy's Club doesn't look like much on the outside. It's just a red brick façade in a block full of buildings that look just like it. It has no windows facing the street, and the only thing to distinguish it is a shiny green door with the number 1958 painted in bold white figures across the top.

Rachel doesn't even try to open this fancy door. Instead she raps on a brass knocker, two quick raps followed by three slow ones. A little window opens and somebody peeps out.

"This is too much like the movies," I mutter. "I feel like Cagney."

"Hush," Rachel says. "Let me do the talking."

The door swings open and we walk in. The place makes up for its lack of size with glitzy class. A long bar runs down one side, while a raised stage, where a set of drums sits idle, rests at the far end. A golden sunray decoration radiates from the stage.

White-covered tables surround a parquet dance floor on three sides. Silver

and crystal gleam at the place settings. Lamps glimmer on every table. I'd expected a seamy bar, not something like this. Tommy runs a swanky joint.

But even in the midst of all this finery, the stale smells of alcohol and tobacco linger. And with the lights turned up high like they are now, little blemishes and warts show – subtle signs of wear and tear, paint chipped away in places and stains on the carpet. But tonight when they turn the lights down low and the band starts to wail – and especially when the gin starts to flow – I'd bet my bottom dollar that nobody notices.

A scrawny little guy with red suspenders leads us toward the bar. He motions toward a couple of high stools at the end, and Rachel and I sit.

“You alright, Rachel?” he says. “Ain't seen you in a while.”

She shakes her head. “Been better, Pete. I came to see Tommy. Is he around?”

Before Pete can answer, a stout, balding guy approaches us from the far end of the bar, a stogy in one hand and a glass of beer in the other. He sets the beer down and extends his arms. Rachel stands to hug him. He wears a fancy suit and tie

with a diamond stick pin. The suit could use a little tailoring. He gives Rachel a big smile like he's genuinely glad to see her

"I need to talk to you, Tommy," she says.

Tommy nods at Pete, who finds someplace else to busy himself. "What's up?" Tommy asks, and adds, "Where's Jim?"

"We split up." In answer to Tommy's unspoken question, she says simply, "He wasn't the man I thought he was."

Tommy casts his eyes in my direction and raises his brows. "This is Nate Forrest," Rachel says.

I extend my hand. "Nathan Bedford Forrest, the Third," I say. "Like the Civil War general. Glad to meet you."

Tommy takes my hand. "Thomas Rafferty O'Day," he says. "The First. Like the saloon keeper."

Rachel explains how we got together and gives him the lowdown on her plight and mine. She mentions how Eddie, the cop, had suggested we come see him. While Tommy listens, he glances from one of us to the other.

Finally he says, "So what do you want from me?"

I figure it's time for me to pipe up.
"We're looking for work, Mr. O'Day."

He gives me a good looking-over.
"Work? What kind of work can you do,
Nathan Bedford Forrest, the Third?"

"In Texas I was a logger," I say.

"I thought all they had was
cowboys," he replies.

"We've got them, too, but where I
come from they have to chase down the
cattle among the pine trees."

Now he looks at me like I'm crazy.
But hell, it's true. East Texas ranches are
in the timberland, and the cows run wild
in the woods.

"He says they have big forests in
Texas," Rachel interjects. "He's a real
hillbilly.

"I've been a carpenter, too," I add,
but Tommy still gives me that funny look
and doesn't say anything, except to point
out that there aren't many trees in Chicago
– or cows either. Then suddenly he puts
his hands on my shoulders and squeezes
the muscles.

"You're a big, strong kid," he says.

"Got that way handling my end of a
two-man timber saw."

He doesn't reply but steps back and looks me over yet again, staring hard at my face. If you look closely enough, you can see that I've been in my share of scrapes, and this isn't lost on Tommy. There are a few minor scars – mainly around an eye and on my chin – and my nose is a little bent. I can thank a big Indian named Mike Batisse for that. He's my nemesis back home.

Tommy takes all this in and finally says, "You just might do, Hillbilly." I'm beginning to be afraid the name will stick, and I'm not sure I like it any better than bumpkin.

Then he turns to Rachel. "You're in luck," he says. "Both of you. And your timing's good. Turns out I've had a couple of . . . resignations."

Tommy grabs my hands and looks at my knuckles. "When was the last time you used these?" he asks.