

CHAPTER 6

Moses in a creaking white coat opened the door. His red-veined eyes surveyed Hadley. There was a touch of arrogance in his face. The doorbell was not in the custom of being rung. That was obvious (and also perhaps one stunning reason for the Senator's defeat).

"I'm from the newspaper," Hadley said. "The local newspaper."

The man turned his head and Hadley marked the ring of flesh above the tight coat collar. When he turned back he resumed his hauteur.

"I was asked to come," said Hadley.

"It's all right, Moses." Mrs. Eubanks was standing in the hall.

Moses widened the door and Hadley, irritated, walked into the hall, past Mrs. Eubanks, and then turned pointedly fixing her level gaze at the woman. They were the same height.

"You were good to come," said Mrs. Eubanks. Her voice had a surprising gentleness. But her face was anything but gentle. It was a bored face on the edge of meanness. Yet it was a handsome face. Not pretty. Handsome. Her hair, white and twisted in the back, softened her eyes. She had a very nice jaw line.

"I'm sorry," Hadley said, "about the death of Dr. ~~Bickley~~^{Eubanks}."

"Indeed," the woman looked confused. "Yes. Shall we go into the parlor?"

Hadley followed saying nothing. She stood as Mrs. Eubanks sat in a small antique rocker. A wicker sewing basket was nearby. Sewing baskets irritated Hadley. She disliked women who knitted or tatted when they were in conversation. It was rude, she considered.

"Do, please." Mrs. Eubanks indicated the sofa facing the rocker.

"You are Rosanna Bickley, are you not? Dr. Bickley's granddaughter?" She would never have mentioned Josh.

Hadley sat on the sofa, adjusting her notebook. "I am Hadley. Rosanna is older." She could hear the chill in her voice. The woman knew perfectly well who she was. She brushed back a strand of hair.

"Oh, of course. You children grow up so quickly."

Hadley leaned forward slightly. "I'm not a child, Mrs. Eubanks."

"She certainly isn't."

Hadley glanced up quickly and then back at her notebook. She felt her face turn instantly scarlet. He was standing in the doorway, his eyes amused as if he had been a witness to her dreams, her wildest fantasies, finding all of it highly amusing because he had tricked her again, had come into her dreams just the way he had when he caught her drinking. She looked up again, not meeting his eyes but dismissing him with a toss of her head. He appeared younger than she remembered, taller and younger.

"Do you know my son?" asked Mrs. Eubanks and the coolness had returned to her voice. "Oliver, do you know this--" His lips moved as he tried to suppress a smile. You have your peasant charm, he seemed to be saying. But his eyelashes were lighter than his hair, straw colored, and they were as long and uneven as she remembered. Hadley turned her gaze to Mrs. Eubanks and she fingered the back of her hair.

Mrs. Eubanks slowly smoothed her dress over her knees. The emerald ring was startling. "As I was saying," which she was not, "Senator Eubanks is very grieved. We all are." She looked questioningly at her son. "Do be seated, Oliver. You can give our young friend what she needs for the newspaper." She stood then. "Please excuse me, Rosanna."

Hadley stood, too.

"Hadley, I mean. Hadley. Please forgive me. I must see Moses. We're driving to New Orleans. For the funeral, you see."

Hadley watched her go. She had a graceful walk. Bitch, she thought. It was clear she didn't care whether the man was dead or not. But across from her, seated now in an armchair, the eyes were still teasing.

Hadley sat again and unconsciously blew her hair from her face. It was a childish gesture and not at all the way she had planned to appear. She met his eyes and for a long while it seemed they looked at one another, he teasingly, she arrogantly, until the realization of it, the meaning, struck her and reached her physically, causing her vision to haze so that the image, the face, mouth, cheekbones, all, blurred and her breath quickened. Then miraculously there was joy and her face broke into a full and bursting smile.

He continued to watch her, his elbow on the arm of the chair and his right hand at his face, thumb on cheekbone and fingers to the brow, half covering his face but watching as if he were viewing a dance, a drama, a curious scene. Hadley, unable to contain the joy in her, tossed her head back.

All of this could not have taken even a minute but to Hadley it seemed forever and she had an instant urge to cross the room, go to him. But she sat feeling the wild clamor inside her.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"Twenty," she lied. She looked down at the paper

in her lap, avoiding his eyes. She had not wanted to be the one to look away first.

She had forgotten the obituary. She looked up. "The obituary," she said.

He continued to gaze and then as if he had made a decision, he rose from the chair. "Do you still drink bourbon?" and his eyes were teasing again.

Hadley tried to still her smile. She nodded and put her hand to the side of her neck.

"Then bourbon it will be."

"But--"

"It doesn't matter about the obituary. I knew my uncle. It's only my mother who cares about such things. She wants everyone to know how noble we are." He grinned. "Don't worry. You can't get fired, you know."

Hadley's eyes widened, then she laughed. "I hope I do. I don't care."

"I'll get you your drink."

"But tell me something, so I can phone it in."

He tossed a piece of paper with writing on it. "My uncle's life," he said. "Two paragraphs. That's all they need to know, all anyone ever needs to know about anyone else."

Hadley stood and for a split second they were facing each other. It seemed a most natural gesture to lift her face to his. But immediately she saw his confusion.

Moses brought her drink on a small silver tray. There was not a second glass. She looked up into the large black face. "Is Mr. Eubanks not returning?"

"Didn't say nothin."

"Then here." She returned the glass and started to rise. "Mrs. Eubank she coming. She say she will join you soon she get through upstairs."

Hadley studied the face. "But--"

How could she have been so mistaken? He did like her. She knew it. "Where is Mr. Eubanks?" Her voice was almost angry.

"He tending to something out yonder."

"He's not going to join us?"

Mrs. Eubanks returned, a small sherry glass in her hand, her own variety of insult which worked. Moses had fixed a double bourbon for Hadley and the contrast between the slender feminine wine glass and Hadley's rich bourbon was pointed.

Mrs. Eubanks sat in the small rocker again, her ankles crossed, her posture slightly forward. Hadley looked toward the hall. Certainly he was coming back. She looked back at the dark drink on the table before her.

"...Dr. Bickley."

Hadley looked up. She hadn't been listening.

"I said how is Dr. Bickley?"

"Oh, Grandfather? He just had his eighty-fourth birthday."

"And your Aunt Mary? A charming woman."

"Nothing goes right for Aunt Mary. Julia's living with us this summer." She eyed the drink. To hell with it, she said to herself and took up the drink.

"Poor Julia."

"Oh?"

"She has a very bad time of it."

"Your grandfather was in the embassy in China, wasn't he?" Mrs. Eubanks replaced a gardenia which had fallen on the table next to her. The gardenias were arranged in a blue porcelain bowl. The leaves were nice with the blue.

Hadley watched her darkly. She knew perfectly

well Grandfather Bickley was not in the embassy.

"He was a medical missionary," she said, "a not very chic thing to be, I suppose."

"He's a very charming man. I don't know why I thought he was in the embassy."

"No," Hadley said and she started to say he was merely a holy man (even if he did forget his fiftieth wedding anniversary). But she said nothing. Oliver had returned. He was holding a drink. Scotch. He walked to the fireplace and placed the drink on the mantle behind him. He stood with his hands behind him, regarding his mother with the same teasing eyes. Hadley felt her face color again. He had very nice lines to his face, a good chin, cheekbones. But she sensed he was acting.

"Oliver will be living with us this summer," said Mrs. Eubanks.

"Oh!" Hadley tried to cover the enthusiasm in her voice. "Really?"

He laughed. "Yes, it's too hot in Florence, so I have to come to Alabama to escape the heat."

"I'd love to live in Florence," Hadley said.

"I wouldn't care how hot it was."

"Oh, you know Florence?" asked Mrs. Eubanks, touching the gardenia again.

"Only through books. I read everything I can about the city." Another lie. She glanced at Oliver. His eyes were still laughing. She was amusing to him. Was that all?

He nodded his head. "Very admirable."

"Do you read very much?" asked Mrs. Eubanks. "I understand the young don't read."

"I really don't think of myself as 'the young.' But I do read. Josh--my father, that is--has a very exceptional library." She hated the woman. How could she love the son and hate the mother?

"And will you follow your father into the newspaper business?" asked Mrs. Eubanks. She had taken up her sewing again.

"No, I don't think so. I really don't like it. I would rather be a novelist. I've written poetry, short stories." She was trying to sound like Rosanna. She had never written one word unless she was forced to at school. She didn't even like writing a letter.

She took another sip of the bourbon. She had had no breakfast and her head was feeling giddy.

She didn't want to make a fool of herself. She knew Oliver was looking at her. She refused to return the gaze. It would be an admission.

"I suppose we'll have the radio on in the car." She was talking to Oliver, but she glanced up at Hadley. "My husband is very interested in the news from the Middle East."

"Yes," Hadley said. "It's so frustrating. Yet it's a fascinating time to be alive."

That, too, was Rosanna's statement. She had said that just last night, but she didn't say what Rosanna had added: "...if I didn't have this brat inside me." And Josh had said he had never heard a woman talk so, that it wasn't feminine. He didn't care who the father was: a child was a child. And Rosanna said, "It's a new day, dearest Daddy. It's all different with women now. We don't just reproduce. We do other things now. We really do. We speak, we walk, sometimes we even read."

"I think it's a terrifying time to live," said Mrs. Eubanks. She had forgot her sewing and was cannily eyeing both Hadley and Oliver as if she sensed the electricity between them, a mother's sense.

Hadley read the verdict: disapproval.

"Will you go to the funeral?" Hadley asked Oliver. Her eyes seemed to widen as she looked at him. She lifted one eyebrow as if to cover any admission.

"I don't go to funerals."

"Don't you think your father will be hurt?" asked Mrs. Eubanks and she gave an incredible little smile.

"No. He understands."

"Doris is coming." Doris was the Eubanks' daughter, married and living in New York.

"A perfect reason for my not going." He turned to Hadley. "My sister and I have a perfect relationship--when she is in New York and I'm in Florence."

Mrs. Eubanks placed the sherry glass aside and rose. "You will excuse me," she said to Hadley and the anger in her voice was not concealed.

"My sister is an enormous bitch," Oliver said when his mother disappeared into the upper reaches of the house.

"So is mine," said Hadley. He laughed. She liked his laugh.

"What do you do now? Go back to the newspaper?"

"I go home and listen to my sister lecture.

She's terribly pregnant and hates every minute of it.

She listens to television all the time. The news.

She gets some vicarious thrill out of all those poor people going to jail. She adores listening to Nixon making a fool out of himself."

"Why don't we have lunch then?"

"Here?"

"My god, no."

Hadley drained her glass.

"You have a nice smile," he said.

She was smiling, she hadn't realized it. Maybe she was drunk.

"I don't usually," she said.

"What?"

"Smile."

"There's a place, a few miles from here. Pleasant enough. At least they don't have the reform school fare you usually get."

"Soul food," said Hadley. "Didn't you know?"

"No, I didn't. Would you like to have lunch?"

"Yes." She fell back onto the sofa. "I would

adore to have lunch." She didn't care whether she was drunk or not. "I'll drive."

"You usually have your way, don't you?"

"Usually."

He laughed again. "The liberated woman. My god, liberated women. A southern Hedda Gabler. My god."

Hadley hugged one of the sofa pillows to her. Her joy was so intense it was almost pain. She wondered, vaguely, if she would ever know such joy again.

But nothing ever exceeded Hadley's fantasies. She knew that as she sat across from Oliver in the inn restaurant. She had dreamed of the meeting so long that now at last it was occurring she was experiencing a disappointment she could not quite comprehend. He appeared older than he had in his mother's living room. Even so, she was drawn to his looks, especially his mouth, which had the edges of cruelty about it. Regarding him now she could not decide whether it was cruelty or weakness she saw. His eyes were not cruel, nor his voice, nor his manner. She preferred to think

the mouth cruel rather than weak. She could never live with a man who was weak. Josh had seen to that at birth. Cruelty or weakness? She thought neither since the total man was basically kind. Of that she was completely assured. It was the combination of all of it, she believed, that attracted her. Each cancelled out the other to create what she saw essentially as a surface panache. And a disguised depth.

The disappointment left when the drinks arrived. He was saying something amusing about not being surprised if his sister someday would lead a bayonette attack across the Rhine. "A feminist," he said. "More of a man than a woman." Hadley was laughing.

But she talked too much at lunch. At least she thought she did. She talked because he said very little and also because of the bourbon. Mainly she talked about herself because he kept asking questions. Had she really put on that act at the country club? He had heard about it. And when she frowned he said perhaps he was asking something he had no "right" to ask. She said that was exactly right.

"Somebody dared me to do it and so I did. Simple."

"You have the most incredibly sad eyes. Why?"

"Sad?" She had never thought of her eyes as sad. She had always considered her eyes her best feature.

He nodded.

She cocked her head. "Maybe they are sad," she said. "Everything's always been backward with me. I'm sad at Christmas and happy on Good Friday. It's always been that way."

"Why?"

She looked away. This was all very delicious, the bourbon, his eyes studying her face and her sitting there knowing she had a potential lover. She had succeeded. The man was intriguing.

"Why?" She looked back at him. "I don't know. I like thunderstorms. I'm happiest then. I'd like to live in Florence. Why do you live there?"

He continued examining her face and then as if satisfied by something he leaned back and sipped his drink for the first time. "Florence? I think I've forgotten why I live there. Once there was a reason, I'm sure."

He took up the two multi-colored straws from

his drink and broke them into ^{two}. "This country doesn't seem to have too much to offer just now, does it? New York is unbelievable. Each time I come back it gets worse. But I love the city. I still do." He tossed the straws into the ash tray. "New York is just a symptom. Just---a---symptom."

Hadley frowned. She didn't want to talk about New York. And there didn't seem to be anything too wrong about America. At least not to her. Actually, she never thought about the country. She had thought of Vietnam, of course, but that was pretty much over and besides Rosanna and Josh bored her to death talking about it so much. They talked incessantly about it, that and the third and fourth and fifth worlds, wherever they were.

"I manage to fill up my days in Florence," he was saying. "I paint. A little. And I have friends. I'm content there. Content, not happy."

"Paint?"

He nodded and then took up his drink. "You're too pretty to be sad, too young."

His face was blurred before her and she found herself without the slightest hesitation talking about

her fears, talking about them as if they were friends. She was afraid of everything, she said. That was why she did the crazy things she did, she guessed. Because she was afraid. She was afraid of dying, of choking to death, of voices "that I sometimes hear--is everyone like that?" She did not wait for an answer.

"...And I don't believe in God. In our library at home there's a painting of my grandfather and it's like a ghost presiding over the house, demanding all of us to be good, holy. I can't be. Isn't that silly? My grandfather was a missionary." She giggled. "Are you bored? Yes, you are. I'm sorry. I'm truly sorry." She cocked her head again. "I don't drink too well. Usually I don't bore people. Are you bored? I'm drunk."

"No." He was frowning, studying her face again. She was wondering if he would like to paint her face.

"I feel as if I've known you forever. You're like a wonderful friend, though I've never had one. I'm very comfortable with you. I'm not with most people. Most people don't like me." She brushed her hair back from her face with her fingers. "They really don't. I think I'm a little more than drunk."

Do you drink as much as people say?"

"I like you. I think you're a very lovely girl, even if you are a little---"

She grinned and sat forward, pressing her hands together. "Do you? Do you really---like me?" She was almost breathless. "I can't believe it. I'm not at all sophisticated. You must know worlds of sophisticated people. I've never been anywhere much. Just Boston. Once. My other grandfather lived there. He hated us. Rosanna and me."

"Who cares for sophistication?"

She looked at him for a long while, then tossed her head back. "I'm so very happy." She smiled at him. "Will we have lunch again?"

"You're a charming child."

"I'm not a child."

"And an angry one?"

"You're like Josh. He never takes me seriously."

"Oh, I think he does. I admire your father, you know."

She did not want to talk about Josh, and she became petulant, looking about the room for the first time. She had not noticed the people at the other

tables. They were all looking at her, though she knew no one. They were travelers, she considered, and idly yawned their dismissal. She was accustomed to being stared at.

"Yes, we'll have lunch," he said and his eyes were teasing again.

"Thank you," she said and she wanted to giggle. She was not a giggler, but he brought that out in her. She had never been so happy. She knew looking at him, seeing the curious expression on his face, a bewilderment now, that she was entering a phase of her life from which she would never return. Her entire life would change and her future lay before her wrapped in afternoons of golden hours.

She would leave Josh's house with its myriad of hapless ordinary creatures, and she would enter Oliver Eubanks' world of beauty, glamour and money, a place she had always dreamed of, even as a little girl lying outside on the grass watching the clouds form into castles and faces of her imagination. Yes, it would be so. They would live in Florence, take a villa and each night dine on a flower-bedecked balcony drinking champagne and telling each other of the

day's events, happy and wildly in love as they toasted
the stars.

Yes.