

CHAPTER 8

Josh discovered Hadley's plans for the impending dinner with Oliver Eubanks. Rosanna had "spoken to" him. For Hadley's own good, she explained. Josh was firm: Hadley was not to leave the house tomorrow night for any reason whatsoever and if she had dinner anywhere it would be right here. In answer to Hadley's furor Josh tried to make his point: it wasn't so much the man's age. "He's just peculiar. He's a problem. He's always been a problem."

"A problem?" repeated Hadley sarcastically. "I'm one. You're always telling me I'm one. Hell, everybody's a problem."

Josh said if she didn't stop using such language she would never be able to go out of the house again. "He's had a bad marriage, he drinks too much and he doesn't do anything. He's as decadent as the country he prefers to live in."

"Doesn't do anything," said Hadley. "Why do people have to do something? Why can't we be like cows and stand under trees listening to the grass grow." She shrugged her shoulders. "But I guess he could actually do something, after all. I hadn't thought of it. Perhaps Oliver could offer his body to be sliced up for dinner. Delicious. 'We're having Oliver for dinner tonight. Why don't you come over? Oh do!'"

"Don't be flip, Hadley. You are not amusing."

"It wasn't my intention to be amusing."

That night Hadley sat at their sober six o'clock dinner staring at Rosanna. Rosanna was forcing the usual dreary conversation, studiously trying to ignore Hadley, forcing a laugh, leaning toward Josh to make a point. As Hadley watched she finally came to a long overdue conclusion. She hated Rosanna. She had never actually believed she did. Or could. Rosanna

irritated her, yes. But the emotion was far deeper.

Both Josh and Rosanna ignored Hadley as they talked. Rosanna had found an amusement: a poor white farm family, the Furman Tills, who lived a mile or so down the road. They had become, in Rosanna's own words, a sine qua non, something like the civil rights movement in the sixties. She wanted to organize all the Furman Tills of the section, the white poor, and eventually the entire South. She would show them the way. Socialism was the only answer, their only answer, "our" only answer. She would show them the way out of their binding religions. A full belly was better than Jesus Christ any day. "Nothing ever ferments because of an idea. It rots because of lack of food."

"Rot," Hadley said. "Nothing but rot. You are what's rotten."

Rosanna continued talking, merely glancing at Hadley. She was trying to be charming.

"Why're you bothering those poor people down there," Hadley said. "Don't they have enough trouble without your hanging around like some weird bat from Vas-sah?"

Rosanna lowered her lids in mock frustration. She was being patient, tolerant. Then she fixed her eyes on Hadley. "I'll try to explain. Something may penetrate."

"Don't bother," Hadley said.

But she explained anyway: Notwithstanding the pure effort of her actions, the Till family was a challenge. They were people Rosanna could lead out of their wilderness. Hadley started to say Rosanna didn't look like Moses to her. But Rosanna raved on. It wasn't as if the poor were strangers to her. She knew the poor, always had. Furman Till was a "true man of the soil." He was wise, good, better than any of us. They deserved a chance in life.

Hadley yawned and Rosanna, irritated, raised her voice and began tapping her fingers on the table. Why wasn't somebody like Furman Till able to have a library like theirs? Why couldn't he have a cook to cook his meals? Why was it they had these things and right out there that poor man had scarcely enough to buy his children shoes? Because of the System, she raved. The system. Herman Till was a victim of the System and so were his children and grandchildren. And why?

"Because they're all lazy sons of bitches, most of them, that's why," said Hadley. "That's the System, if you want to know the truth."

Rosanna smiled benevolently. "Why our little school girl is beginning to have i-deahs."

"Not only ideas," said Josh angrily, "but ideas laced with gutter talk."

Hadley clenched the napkin in her lap. "How sweet it is." She turned to Josh. "How exciting for you to have Rosanna back, somebody you can talk to. Her little marriage must have left you quite lonely, now that I think about it."

Rosanna shook her head slowly from side to side. "You'll never learn, will you," she said darkly. "I thought we were going to see some little differences in you this year now that you're a year older. But you've just gotten worse."

"You don't know anything about the poor," Hadley said. She hated the look in Rosanna's eyes, hated her voice. "And quit saying 'we.'"

"And I presume you know all about them."

"I know more about the poor than you do." It was true. Hadley had grown up playing with the young

farm children. Rosanna had no friends at all. She was taller than anybody in the entire grammar school, a fact Hadley continuously reminded her of. It was only after she went to college that she began to develop some style.

"Our lit-tle philosopher," said Rosanna, smiling her gummy smile.

Hadley took up her fork and slammed it on the table. "Little philosopher, shit!"

Josh rose from his chair. "Leave the table, Hadley."

"Gladly." Her face was fire-hot. She hated both of them, hated them with everything she had in her, hated their morality, their phony saintliness, their, yes, snobbery. She was better than they were. She was. She knew it.

"Blessings be on you both and God save your damned souls." She stood crouched before Josh.

The slap stung. They faced each other. Josh had never hit her before. All she could see was a blur.

She left the dining room and she heard Rosanna:

"I thought things had improved. I had hope."

Hadley paused in the hall.

"She's all right," she heard Josh say. "She just has these ups and downs."

"She's furious because of Oliver Eubanks," said Rosanna and sighed. "How did that ever come about?"

Josh said nothing and Hadley walked up the stairs two at a time, slapping the stair rail as she went. She wished Rosanna would go back to her greasy curly husband. It would serve her right. Bitch to bastard, belly to belly. She laughed out loud, the thought was hilarious, Rosanna belly to belly with anybody.

"How come you're up here?"

Mrs. Shorter knew perfectly well what had happened downstairs. That was evident by her expression, a kind of peace, an inner smile. Satisfaction. She'd probably been hanging over the stair rail. Quarrels were another of Mrs. Shorter's pleasures, something to relieve the monotony of her grey life.

"Aren't gone get no dinner, are you?"

"I don't want any. Food has never really interested me."

"First time I ever heard tell of that."

Hadley was inspecting the woman's night attire, the thin brown curlers twisted in her hair like calve's tails, and the pink slip with one narrow strap falling on her thick upper arm. On her face were splotches of white ointment, one covering the mole, and on her dyed black hair was a thick net, which came across her forehead and gave her the bizarre resemblance to a Roman soldier. What was it all for, Hadley wondered. She stared, hating that this pathetic woman was all she had in the world. "They hate me," she blurted out. "Both of them. They hate me." And she was crying, falling into the naked arms of Mrs. Shorter. "Why?" she sobbed into the flat breasts.

"They don't hate you. You bring it on yourself when you don't act right."

Hadley looked up into the woman's incredible face. She wanted her sympathy now, needed it.

"They're mean to me. They don't care what happens to me. Nobody cares!" And she heard she was yelling, "Not even you."

Mrs. Shorter then was patting her back. "I keer," she said. "What I think is---" pat, pat---

"It don't make no difference at all. What matters now is---is Jesus. You got to put yourself in His hand. That's all that matter." Pat, pat. "Jesus is your best friend. He prepares you. That's how come He give you bad feelings, how come you have these here spells---to prepare you for what's to come on in case it's bad." Pat, pat. "Cause it's gone come, bad things. And Jesus He give you things so you'll be ready, really ready to take all ats coming."

She was entertaining herself, raving away in delight. She wasn't really talking to anybody, she was talking to herself, loving it. Joy! Joy! Jesus is here. Mrs. Shorter is saved! Hell! "Everybody's alone," Hadley uttered. "Everybody---even..." she started to say "you."

"Aren't if you got Jesus."

"I'm tired of Jesus, Mrs. Shorter." Hadley removed herself from the woman's body. "I'm dead tired of Jesus. Right now I wouldn't mind seeing the devil for a change. Just think, he might even be witty, good looking, a little something different. A bit of gaiety in our morbid stupid lives. How about

that, Mrs. Shorter? Why, dear, you look stricken. I do declare." And she began to snicker.

Mrs. Shorter glowered at her. "You're his instrument."

"Whose?" She was gaping at the woman. For a moment she thought she was talking about Oliver Eubanks.

"The Prince of Darkness, that's who."

Hadley turned from her. It was inane she had to find comfort from Mrs. Shorter. Yet the rage she felt earlier had eased. At least she had that to thank Mrs. Shorter for.

"It's all so boring here," she said quietly, more to the room than to Mrs. Shorter. "Josh and Rosanna are such snobs." She turned to face Mrs. Shorter again. "Josh does like me the best, doesn't he? I know he does. I know it."

"Then how come you calling him a snob and ever other bad thing you can think up?"

"He is a snob, sort of. I'm not."

"Then how come you fussing cause Rosanna wants to help them folks down the road. How come? Such as that needs help."

"Because they don't want my help, that's why." Hadley walked over to her dressing table and with the back of her long fingers stroked her hair, admiring its sheen. Was she getting wrinkled? "They're busy with their work. Furman Till and people like that don't want to talk to Rosanna about politics." She giggled. "He's white trash, you know." It was a mean statement. She knew it. She knew the fury it would cause in Mrs. Shorter. But she didn't care. Mrs. Shorter was a bitch. She deserved the statement. "Besides, Rosanna goes down there just because she's curious. She enjoys slumming. She's no saint. She's just a snoop. Most people who go pretending after the poor are nothing but snoops." She turned to Mrs. Shorter's red face. "You wanta know something?" The woman was staring at her, her eyes fixed. "When somebody dies there's only about one or two people who're really sorry. The others are just curious or excited, something to do. 'Let's go down and see those poor Tills, cause they're starving and we aren't, thank goodness. Besides, it'll be something to do, get us out of our boring lives.'"

Mrs. Shorter kept staring. "Lord God, child."

"Don't Lord God me. I know what I'm talking about. Rosanna---" and she mocked the sweet tones Mrs. Shorter always used when she said Rosanna's name--- "---says she goes down there to teach that poor farmer how to talk properly. Christ, she ought to be ashamed. Can't you just hear it--straight out of Oxford: 'And heah we have our really quite lovely rows of cot-ton which I pick with my own hands. Iy've always thought it rahther ripping to work with my hands, you know. You know?' Rosanna's a fool."

"Hadley Bickley, there isn't nothing in this world wrong with trying to better yourself. It's a shame and a sin to mock the good."

Hadley rose from the dresser. She was holding the hairbrush in her hand. For a moment she considered throwing it, not at Mrs. Shorter, just throwing it at the door or the wall or out the window. Anything to quiet the lecture. If one more person lectured her in this house she was going to throw something-- probably at Rosanna.

She faked a yawn. "I do believe I'm ready to retire, Mrs. Shorter." She smiled a Rosanna smile.

After breakfast the next day Rosanna and Hadley had the worst battle of their lives. Hadley was sitting half sprawled in the armchair in the library. She was eyeing at various intervals both the portrait of her mother and the decanter of bourbon. One was a catalyst for the other.

She was wondering if her mother had been as tall as Rosanna. She had never asked Mrs. Shorter that, and Josh never spoke his dead wife's name. Rosanna was six feet, almost. And the worst part of that was Hadley had had to look up at her giant of a sister all her life. If she could avoid it she never stood by Rosanna and never, absolutely never, faced her. Rosanna had looked down on her too long, both mentally and physically. The decanter won out. Hadley got up from the chair and removed the top from the bottle.

"I see you." It was Rosanna. Rosanna had also become a little coy. Highly unbecoming. Hadley dangled the top of the decanter in front of her.

"Yes," she said. "I drink."

Rosanna stood there, one eyebrow lifted, watching.

Hadley poured the bourbon into a glass. Then she lifted it. "You see, dear sister, you have your socialism and I have my whisky. Not much difference when you think of it."

Rosanna continued to glower.

"Here's to Farmer Till. May he speak with the tongue of angels."

Rosanna's face went instantly red. "Don't you care?" she said. "Don't you care one bit about your father? Don't you know you're killing him? Haven't you got the least sense? You're not crazy, you're just mean. You've always been mean." Her eyes were slits. "And remember what I said: meanness, then the madness. You're so damned selfish, you're in love with yourself. It's about to drive you crazy. And if anybody else does anything halfway decent, then you pout and criticize. If you don't watch out you'll be locked up before you're nineteen."

Hadley threw it. All the bourbon from the decanter, threw it straight in Rosanna's face. It seemed to flow forever. And afterward Rosanna stood there, her hair drenched in the foul smelling liquid.

Instinctively, Hadley began to laugh. She threw her head back and kept laughing. She couldn't stop. God, it was funny. Finally she was able to say, "St. Jude." She repeated, "St. Jude."

She was hit then in the face with a book and the hurt of it fired the rage and she picked up the footstool and threw it. Just threw it, not at Rosanna, but at the world. Finally they were on the floor and somewhere was Mrs. Shorter, sounding far away but near too, leaning over them, and all Hadley knew was she had a fist full of Rosanna's hair. She was holding on to it like a savage holding a head. Rosanna's head was in her hand and she began to scream.

"Lard Jeeezus," said Mrs. Shorter, "wallering aren't gone get you nowhere. If you kilt Rosanna's baby they'd lock you up for good."

Rosanna got up from the floor and without a word to either left the room. Hadley lay there staring at the hair in her hand.

She said nothing to Mrs. Shorter. She was thinking of her great aunt who had lived in Peking. The aunt had attended a school for American children. She had a roommate who went mad and tried to kill her.

The aunt had awakened one night and the roommate was biting the neckline of her own nightgown and leaning over her aunt, stark mad. And in the aunt's struggle to escape the girl had pulled out one side of the other's hair. When the girl was hospitalized, she spoke Latin as if it were her only language, though she had been a poor student. Finally, when death came, the Chinese nurses opened the window so that the soul would leave the room. Had it come to her, that soul? Hadley wondered and stared at the hair in her hand.

"How come you do these things? How come?" asked Mrs. Shorter. "Now come on here, let's get you up off the floor."

The room was very silent. Tonight, Hadley was thinking, she would tell Oliver Eubanks what she had done, how she had lain on the floor with half of Rosanna's hair in her hand. He would understand. He was the only person in the world who would understand.

"Git up," said Mrs. Shorter. "Mercy Lord, who ever heard tell of such as this."

Hadley stood, the hair matted in her hand.

"Here, Mrs. Shorter, here's a little gift for you. Put it in a locket and you'll always have Rosanna near. Bless you for all your kindnesses through the years."

Mrs. Shorter sneered at the damp wad of hair in her hand.

"Prince of Darkness," she said and looked straight into Hadley's eyes.