

CHAPTER 9

Hadley left the house at eight. It was raining. Josh had gone back to the office and Rosanna was in her room listening to a re-run of the Congressional hearings. Hadley walked to the car, rattling the keys in her hand, unmindful of the rain. But midway to the car she paused. The sense of recklessness she felt earlier had vanished.

She was afraid. Just why she could not explain precisely. It was just there, the fear, like an isolated cloud without meaning or purpose. She knew she was starting on an adventure that would irreparably

alter her life. Never again would she be Hadley Bickley, seventeen, of Greenleaf, Alabama, and there was a sadness as if she were saying good-bye, walking away from herself.

But she had always wanted to say good-bye to that Hadley, to this Greenleaf. Reasonably she should be elated, not afraid or sad. Waiting for her was the most attractive man she had ever met and beyond him was the world she had dreamed all her life.

Her hands were unsteady on the wheel as she drove out the gravel driveway and passed familiar landmarks, more familiar now that she knew she was leaving them: the brick grammar school where she had made a straight-A record and received her first kiss behind a ragged privet hedge near a garbage can.

The school was the more pleasant of her memories in town. Not so the church, a small stone structure surrounded by holly trees. The building was nice in its simplicity but threatening in its stance. In there were so many "thou shall nots," so many hawk faces, so many Sundays. They all talked of peace there. But instead she met guilt.

What would she tell Josh when she got home? She would tell him simply that she was in love, that love was a good thing, not a bad thing. He would have to get used to her choice, she would say, love him as a son, love him as she did. He must love him. Was it Josh she was afraid of? Was she afraid of leaving him? No.

She drove through "downtown" Greenleaf. Half the buildings were empty. The town was dying. With all of its summer hillside beauty it was slowly dying. Let it die, she said to herself. The downtown was ugly. One short street of decaying squat buildings and dirty gutters. Poor Josh. He loved every inch of the place. She wanted to cry thinking of Josh's loyalty.

She pressed her foot on the accelerator. There was no time for tears or rotting streets. She was in love. I love Oliver Eubanks. I do. I do.

She drove into the Eubanks driveway. Gardenia bushes were everywhere: surrounding the swimming pool, lining walkways. The thick odor permeated the heavy air. It would be a very black night filled

with the gardenia odor and wild honeysuckle. An Alabama night. Mad Hadley. Mad Hadley. Go away, fear....

"Good, you've come. Just in time to make the salad."

He met her at the door. He was wearing tan slacks and a black knitted golf shirt, open at the neck.

"Salad?" He was thinner than she had thought. He must have been in the sun. He was sunburned underneath his eyes and on his cheekbones. His hair looked fairer.

He was holding on to the door, slightly bent as if he were looking into her face, examining it, trying to gage her mood, discover something.

Tell me why I am afraid, she said to herself, and where I am going. But aloud she said:

"Are we having dinner here?"

"Do you mind? I like to cook."

"I don't know how." It was true. She despised anything connected with the kitchen. She hated the smell of food in a house.

"Do you plan to seduce me?" She saw his reaction, a certain wide-eyed surprise, then humor in the eyes.

"Josh, my father, wouldn't approve, you know."

"You ought to be spanked, of course. But the answer is 'yes.' Shall I call Josh?"

"You can let me in first." She lightly touched the door.

"I'd almost forgotten." He opened the door with a bow of grandeur.

"I've always wanted to be a wanton woman." She walked past him. "Josh will have his vengeance. He has to protect my sort-of good name."

"Shall we drink to that?" He was smiling, a very sweet smile. It was odd, the smile, a very youthful smile. She smiled back.

"My god, you're a beautiful young girl."

Hadley looked away from him, into the parlor. She knew she was looking her best. The simple yellow dress brought out the darkness of her hair and the sun tan she had been working on since April. "I know it," she said, turning back to him. "Yes, let's have a drink, large stiff ones in tumbler glasses that will positively destroy our lives and livers. And then

you'll tell me about Florence and Savanarola^o and all the women you have loved and lost. Especially lost. Why not?"

"Yes, why not?"

They were acting, Hadley thought. Why did people always act? Why didn't they skip the silliness? But perhaps the acting was the fun of it. Or the grief. The "love-play," as the obscene medical books described it.

They walked through the hallway, into the dining room and beyond to the breakfast room. He wanted to show her what he had been doing. "My elaborate preparations. I'm really a very good cook."

She was looking at the back of his head, the cut of his hair, the way it edged his collar. She liked the back of his head and the way he held his shoulders as if he were perpetually lifting them, shrugging his life away. The thought was amusing.

But the fear was still with her. There were ghosts in the house, the ghosts of the Senator grieving for his dead brother and that of his manicured wife. She felt their presence everywhere, listening to their silly talk, disapproving. She knew they

were still in New Orleans, but they had left their ghosts behind. Houses always seemed to hold their owners.

There were eyes in the night. Everywhere. She had to act. But then she was always acting. She was never at ease. With anyone. She had thought she would be at ease here. She was not.

The breakfast room was filled with wicker furniture, hunting prints and too many plants. Beyond the main table was a small round table covered with a flimsy green cloth. It was centered with a bowl of Queen Elizabeth roses and set with flower-designed plates and wine glasses. Hadley stared at it.

"Did you do this?"

"Hardly. Rose T did it."

"Who?"

"Rose T, the cook."

"Why T?"

"Who knows?"

Hadley turned to him. "How sweet of you. Really." And she smiled a timid smile. "No one has ever set such a table just for me, not even on my birthdays."

You're very---" She didn't finish. He was looking at her with such intensity that instinctively she leaned forward, reached upward and put her hands gently to the back of his head bringing his lips to hers. The first touch of his lips told her what she had known all along. He not only desired her, there was more, a tenderness, an affection. She felt enclosed, protected in his embrace. There were no ghosts. Or fears. Or pain.

She looked up into his face.

He kissed her again and she felt his body respond. But immediately he released her, gazing into her face as if she were a stranger he must know, had to know. "Come with me," he said.

She followed him easily, her breath coming shakily and her heart wild. Then she stopped short. He was leading her outside. He opened the door, gently nudging her forward. They walked to the car and he opened the front door, easing her into the driver's seat. He closed the door.

"Now good night," he said.

There were odd shadows on his face from the porch light.

Hadley's mind was spinning. She was clutching on to the opened window of the car.

"Josh was correct. You never should have come."

"But--"

He sighed heavily and smiled the odd smile once more. "If I had met you when I was younger--"

Hadley tried to open the door.

"Go home, Hadley. Find someone your age and be happy. You will be happy."

"I'll never be happy. I've never been happy. I love you. I---"

"Good night." He walked away and she watched until he entered the door of the house. She started to run after him, but the door to the house slammed with a finality.

She started the car, her sight half blinded by tears.

"I see this whole situation as a human tragedy," Josh was saying.

Hadley paused in the hallway. Rosanna and Julia and Josh were in the library. They were talking about President Nixon.

Hadley looked in the hall mirror to inspect her swollen eyes. She put her fingers to them, widening them as if again they would tell her some truth. Then she buried her face in her open palms. The mirror had told all, the frustration, humiliation. Yes, above all, the humiliation.

She had to go into the library. She took a handkerchief from her handbag, blew her nose, glanced at her eyes again.

"Hadley, is that you?"

It was Josh. She went into the library. They were having coffee. Josh was seated in the arm chair, his shiny manicured thumbs twirling at his belly. Hadley took in the scene. The sight of the three of them caused her stomach to tense. They were so lonely, so plain, so drab. She had never seen them with such perspective. She was thinking of her birthday table with the green cloth and the Queen Elizabeth roses.

"Well, you're home," Josh said brusquely. "And late. Where have you been?"

"Driving."

Julia broke the silence with one of her loud

and untimely laughs. It seemed to echo in the large room.

"Why are you so dressed up?" asked Rosanna, slowly turning her gaze from the incredible Julia to Hadley. "Our lit-tle yellow bird."

"So amusing, Rosanna," said Hadley. "Really, dear, I believe you could be one of those boring stand-up comediennes if you only tried a little."

"Be seated, Hadley," said Josh. And Julia let forth another laugh. It was her way of communicating. She was saying to Hadley she was on her side, her one-woman team. Hadley smiled in appreciation.

"But---as we were saying," said Rosanna, glancing once at Hadley---"and we were saying things---I think you're entirely wrong, Josh. I see nothing tragic about Nixon. I only see evil, even insanity."

"Every fall from Grace is a tragedy," said Josh. He was gazing straight ahead, his thumbs still twirling.

Rosanna rested both hands beneath her chin, her pointed elbows on the mahogany arms of the chair. For a moment Hadley wanted to laugh. Rosanna with her elbows and enormous stomach looked like a round apple with toothpicks stuck in it.

"The old verities," said Rosanna. "You know, you really amaze me. You really do."

"How's that?"

"You can write so beautifully and imaginatively about Government, see so logically and with it all you have this hideous Rotarianism about you. It's not you. It really isn't."

"The Rotary Club isn't the worst thing in the world. As a matter of fact it's probably one of the better things just now."

"Ohhh, Oh Oh," said Rosanna. "It's the Rotarians who've caused all the wars, all the poverty." She pursed her lips in disgust. "Total Bourgeoisie with their small town minds and--and--greed. They try to save their evil consciences by sending baskets of food to the poor at Christmas. Don't tell me about Rotarians."

Hadley looked away from Rosanna. Outside a rain-soaked cedar branch was slowly and methodically scratching against the panes of the glass doors. It was a frigid sound as if a scream had pierced all of nature. She put her hands to her ears and finally over her mouth to hold her own scream.

"...now what they ought to do is put Furman Till in the Rotary Club and put the Rotarians out there on Till's red clay farm. God, I'm tired. I've been taking care of his children all afternoon. I think they have worms."

Hadley let her hand drop to her lap. She would go back to the Eubanks tonight. When everyone here went to bed she would go back. He wanted her to come back. She was positive of that, as positive as her own will to go there.

Julia gave forth with another laugh but perceiving Rosanna's stare she abruptly stopped. "Worms are terrible things," said Julia. "I surely am glad I don't have them." She began picking at her stockings.

Hadley left the room without a word. Yes, she would go back. At the top of the stairs she fisted her right hand. She would go even if he slammed the door in her face. It was the first time in her life she had ever....

"...And then one day God come down and spoke to me, said--said alcohol's ruinin your life and it was."

"He just spoke to you?"

"He did, come right in my room while I was lyin thar in the bed."

"Praise God. God is great."

"Mah famly life had come to pieces, and---I could cry just thinkin about it---mah chirrum didn't wanta have nothin to do with me, my husband he wanted a divorce. I'd just stay in the house drinking and thinking and doin nothin for nobody till He come..."

Mrs. Shorter was listening to her nightly religious program on television. Originating from Atlanta the program continued throughout the night, soliciting funds and testimonials. Mrs. Shorter had sent in a dollar so that the program could stay "on the arr." It was the testimonials that kept her spellbound. When the person found God Mrs. Shorter became restless, began looking for her sewing. But broken homes and sinful ways kept her glued to her chair, staring open-mouthed at the pathetic dramas of doom and evil.

Hadley glanced in her room. This would be one of the good nights, no soliciting of funds, just the ways of transgression. Mrs. Shorter would be

completely absorbed, she would never notice Hadley's absence. Josh would be reading his myriad of newspapers in the library and Rosanna, Dr. Spock. No one would miss her.

Hadley climbed the stairs to the third floor. Julia was sitting in the wicker rocking chair staring into space.

"Julia, listen," Hadley said.

Julia started. "You scared me." And she laughed her scratching laugh, sucking in air as if she were suffocating.

Hadley faced her grimly, her hands on her hips. "You've got to help me."

"Me?"

"When Josh goes to bed, when he quits reading, I want you to go downstairs and unlock the front door. I'll close it when I come in. All right?"

"Are you going somewhere?"

Hadley nodded. "Will you do it?"

"What if I get caught?"

Julia was afraid of everything, mostly burglars. She remembered a burglary when she was a child. She had never recovered from the fright.

"You won't get caught."

"What if your father---"

"Well, look, I'm going. Don't say anything to anybody."

Julia looked at Hadley sideways. "Are you in trouble? Can I help you?"

"No. No. Nothing like that." For a moment she was tempted to tell her everything. She left the room. Tomorrow she might tell her. But by tomorrow who knew what she would have to tell?

"Praise God," came the voice from Mrs. Shorter's room.

Hadley slammed the door to her bedroom and went straight to her dresser. She didn't know whether she was doing the right thing or not, the smart thing. Her face in the mirror told her nothing. It only reflected misery and staring at it she finally buried her face in her hands, sobbing. Just live through them, she thought. Live the years. Endure. Then it will all be over. After awhile she reexamined her drenched and swollen face in the mirror. Then seeing her misery she slammed her comb down, left the room and went out the door to her car. If he

didn't want her, he would have to tell her face to face.

Love, she was thinking. Perhaps Rosanna was right. That it was a woman's word. Men didn't love like women. Love for a woman was everything: sacrifice, giving, even adoration. Men only loved with their bodies.

Why was she chasing after this man? She had never done such a thing. She was always the one chased. But this was different. There was not the time. He might leave, go back to Italy, leave her here with the empty stores and Julia's laugh.

She was calm as she drove into the Eubanks' driveway. She had convinced herself of the rightness of what she was doing. The gamble was worth it. She could not go back to the old way, the life in Greenleaf with its fears and emptiness, always dreaming the life she could never reach. The dreams were as illusive as the yellow butterflies that filled the landscape every autumn. They were everywhere, the butterflies, like little fears.

A distance away from the main house and hidden in a grove of hollies was the garçonnière, a small brick cottage usually occupied by guests now. Oliver had lived in the cottage since his seventeenth birthday when it was built and presented to him as a gift from his parents.

The main house was dark, but there was a light on in the cottage. Hadley parked her car and made the way to the entrance. Her steps on the gravel driveway were loud in the silence. A tall crape myrtle, the color of watermelon, was beginning to bloom. In the veiled light she saw one of its limbs sweeping on to the porch. It reminded her of the desolate cedar branch at home.

The brass on the door was highly polished. There was no bell, only a basket to receive mail. She knocked.

The door opened. He had a drink in his hand. He placed it aside and opened the door wider. He said nothing. There was nothing to say. She was in his arms, sobbing. He kissed her eyes, her cheeks. Through a haze, once, she saw a painting on an easel. It resembled a terrible wound, the colors of an

evening sky, purple, yellow, red. She smelled the whisky on his breath and it was like the painting.

"If you hadn't come, I would have come to you."

She said nothing but walked with him to the back rooms as if she had done so every night of her life, this virgin bride with a heart in her as wild as a fawn.