

CHAPTER 13

"I was thinking," said Oliver, "that the existence of man on this earth is shorter than the white shark's and now man, it appears, is becoming the shark." He swirled the ice in his round glass filled to the brim with dark whisky. Hadley saw at once he was quite drunk. "What a brutal world we are forced to live in."

They were sitting on the wicker sofa and he was fingering a lock of Hadley's hair. She had cried out the conversation with Josh and the subsequent terror.

"But then you wouldn't know about such things, would you, my innocent? I hope you never shall."

Hadley was almost sick with fear and disappointment. She had run to him for help and all he talked

about was sharks. She had driven along the highway barely able to see the road for the tears that would not go away.

"But--but," she interrupted.

"Oh," he said, as if somehow discovering her.

"Don't fret. You should never see a psychiatrist. What you need is a good doctor who's had some training in chemistry. I'll get you a drink and---I have a birthday present for you. Quite an interesting one, even if I do say so."

He stood and she grabbed his arm. "But you don't think I'm mad, do you? You won't let them take me away, lock me up." She was swallowing crazily and the words were confused. His face was like a mist before her. Only his eyes looked out. They appeared heavy lidded.

"I can't breathe," she cried. "I can't---"

He sat beside her again.

"It's nothing. You're over-breathing. Hyperventilation I think they call it. You'll be all right." He held her hand, and she fell against him, exhausted.

"Take me away. Quickly. Take me away. Now."

"Tomorrow," he said.

For a moment she said nothing, then she looked up at him, took hold of his face with both her hands, staring into his eyes to see if the truth was there. He had never lied to her. He was too gentle to hurt anyone. She found herself sobbing and she knew it was not wholly because of him, her joy, but there was grief. The whole day, her sad birthday.

He brought her a drink in a similar round glass. She saw he had replenished his own.

"You drink too much," she managed to say.

"You cry too much."

"Our first argument." She smiled through her tears. "Where is my present?"

"Oh." He raised his left hand, then clenched and unclenched it. He had characteristically quick movements and a way of walking, even in the small house. It was a determined walk, almost loping.

He went into the bedroom. "You wait there," he called to her. "And close your eyes. Put your hands over your eyes."

Her tears were ending. Tomorrow they would leave, marry, and now, this very moment, the one

she loved more than anyone on earth was giving her a birthday present, telling her to close her eyes, playing this child's game because he wanted to please. Josh and his talk of psychiatrists and doom were far behind, resting in that cold formal parlor which now in her happiness appeared in her mind like a slab of granite in a graveyard. Poor Josh. How lonely you will be in that room. I will write to you often.

"Now," said Oliver.

But she continued to cover her face as if it were physically impossible to move her hands. She knew what she would see before her. A ring. A large diamond, possibly with emeralds. But she didn't want to look. Not now. She wanted to savor the time knowing it was perhaps to be the happiest in her entire life and it would never come again, not in the same way.

"You may look," he said.

Slowly she slid the palms of her hands down her face. They rested at the sides of her neck. Almost reluctantly she opened her eyes. Her disappointment

was physical, affecting her stomach as if she had been struck by an enormous fist.

Before her was a portrait of herself, life-size and in an unimaginative traditional style. Even her untrained eye could see the inferior quality of the work. He had no talent. She looked up into his smiling face. There was pride written there, and it was that, the pride, that eased her stunned body. She was pitying the man she loved.

"Yes, you like it. I can tell. I've caught you, the very essence, those frightened sad eyes." He was almost agitated, pointing to the picture. "See, you see the line here, and the hair. There is depth in the face, so much depth."

There was no depth. Only flatness. How could life have tricked him so?

"I've memorized your face, you see--every shadow, every line. I've never worked without a model. Where will you hang it? It must be framed correctly. I'll do it myself."

He took a nervous swallow from his glass. Hadley sat watching him, mesmerized as if she were watching a player.

"Tell me exactly what you think. Were you surprised?"

Hadley nodded.

"Surprised?"

"Yes."

He lifted the picture. "I knew you would like it." He looked at her with lidded eyes. "It's my best work. Give me your comments. Don't you like it? But, of course, you really know so little about art. Don't worry. I will teach you. I'll teach you everything." He turned completely around and then facing her again he grinned: "Happy birthday, darling."

Hadley rose, put her arms about him. "Thank you. I do thank you. Poor you."

He held her from him. "What do you mean?" He looked almost angry.

"What do you mean?"

"What's this 'poor you' business?"

Hadley forced a smile. "Why, nothing. You're so sensitive. I guess that's what I mean. It's not easy to be so sensitive." Josh had said that to her once.

He carefully placed the picture against the wicker chair, then he stood back, regarding it.

"If I don't have talent--I don't mean just talent--I mean great talent, I'll kill myself."

"And that would help everything, wouldn't it?"

"There's nothing worse."

"What?"

"Someone who believes his own dreams, and then one fine day there is nothing. Just the dream. Power, people talk about power. The only power on this earth is genius." He was swaying.

"Power?"

"I've always thought power was a very demeaning thing, power on this earth. Silly, really. That is, if in this nihilistic world one has Christian leanings. There is only one power, I suppose."

Hadley was trying to make sense of it all. He was mumbling and he was very drunk.

"Don't I count?" She refused to comment on the picture.

"You?"

"Well, yes. Your bride-to-be, you might say."

He sat beside her and took her hand, examining

her long fingers. "You must know, precious one, my art is first."

"Someone once told me I was a work of art."

"Conceited broad, aren't you?"

"Oliver, dear, you're quite drunk. You really are."

"Yes, my dear, drunk, drunk, drunk. My poor liver. God knows."

Hadley took his face firmly in her hands again, looking from one eye to the other. "You do remember, don't you? We're leaving tomorrow, you and I."

He nodded.

"What time?"

"High noon."

Hadley withdrew from him and when she did his watch fell to the floor. She looked as he stumbled and crushed the face. Both stood regarding the cracked face, the wild distorted hands reaching upward. It was like a person whose life was ended in violence, the fever gone from the broken body.

"Behold, how sorrow has cracked my face."

Oliver quoted the lines and then throwing back his head laughed into the silent room.

Hadley bent to pick up the watch. She would buy another, a wedding gift.

Carefully she placed it on the table by the sofa. "You've broken your watch," she said nonsensically.

He merely glanced at it. "Time," he said. "Time. 'But ever at my back I always hear Time's winged chariot hurrying near.'" He bowed to the watch. "Not a very important thing, time."

But it was important to her, Hadley thought. She wanted to be young and beautiful all her life so that the wonder of their lives would never end. When she was old they could lock her up, bring in the mad psychiatrists. But for now there was her escape from Greenleaf and Florence and wine and music and laughter and art and the one poor talentless man she worshipped above all others, all were ahead.

Yet she kept staring at the watch. It was truly a dead thing.

"Get me to the church on time," sang Oliver off-key. "Get me to the---" He half stumbled over a footstool and fell to the sofa.

"Come, my lovely." He held out his arms.

"Tomorrow," she half whispered. She put two fingers to her lips and then placed them on his forehead. "Good night. You're very drunk. Sleep well."

She left the portrait against the chair and went out into the darkness.

Josh was waiting for her, pacing. She glanced first at the clock in the library. Eleven forty-five. Then she met Josh's gaze. The pupils in his eyes were like needle-points. Oddly, she had no fear of his rage nor her own reaction to it. Never had she felt so sure of herself. And of Josh.

"Where have you been?"

"At the Eubanks'."

"The Eubanks? Or that Oliver?"

Hadley calmly walked past him to stand before the French doors. She could see nothing. Only darkness and the reflection of her face in the glass. It reminded her of Oliver's painting. This, now, would have made a better picture, her reflection coming back to her like heat waves from the veranda lamps. She would help him with his work, make a good

artist out of him. She stood there at the door with her back to Josh for what seemed a long while. Then without turning she said, "'That Oliver,' as you refer to him, is soon to be your son-in-law, my husband. But do we have to go through all that again?" She had every intention of continuing her little drama, but when she turned she was startled by the look on Josh's face. The face was so utterly pained and for one horrible moment she was afraid he might cry. Josh, the mighty, the raver, the lion, crying. She believed she could not bear that.

He turned and Hadley gazed at his pear-shaped body, the sloping shoulders, wider hips, the bald innocent head with the rims of the thick glasses. She wanted to go to him, comfort him like a mother, not a daughter. The back of his head was so vulnerable.

"I'm sorry," was all she said.

He lowered his head. "I would like to talk to Oliver." He turned to her. "And to you about your moral responsibilities."

"What moral responsibilities?"

"You have none. You're like so much of the world

today. Selfish, without principles. You've been brought up to know differently."

"Now, Josh, what has that got to do with my marriage? Frankly, if you want to know the truth, I think you're being a bit selfish. You're thinking of yourself, how terrible to have a daughter married to someone you don't like. Well, I'm the one who's marrying. Not you." She began walking about the room slapping at pieces of furniture. "I'm leaving this place. Tomorrow. I'm leaving this house and all your lectures about morals and principles and God. I'm leaving to be very, very happy. Happy, Josh. Do you understand? You've never been happy. And the reason you haven't is because you've never freed yourself from your tight little moral world. I have. I'm free."

Josh merely looked at her. "I see." He went to the telephone.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm calling your fiancee."

"He's asleep."

He placed the receiver back. "Then tomorrow. I'll talk with him tomorrow."

The vision of Oliver lying on the wicker sofa dead drunk returned to her. She started to smile, but then from nowhere came another vision and she began to scream. She saw Oliver's face, but it was shrunken and old, wrinkled and dried like heads savages placed on poles to frighten their white brothers.

"No, no." She was screaming and then Rosanna and Mrs. Shorter were in the room. She was holding on to Josh's arm, but the vision kept returning.

"Take it away. Please, please."

"She's either drunk or being dramatic again," came Rosanna's calm voice.

I'm not, Hadley wanted to say. She wasn't drunk. She hadn't finished the drink Oliver had given her and it had been hours since she and Isaiah drank together in the woods.

"What is it, Hadley?" came Josh's voice.

She let go of him. She could not tell the truth. "I thought I saw something," she managed, "a shadow there at the window."

But the vision came again, though clouded this time, and she fell face downward on the seat of the

wing chair as if she could darken the sight, will it away. Her heart was as wild as a bird's and behind her there was only silence. Finally a hand was rubbing her hair. She glanced up. It was Mrs. Shorter and the very look of her made the vision vanish. She stood and threw her arms about the woman. "I love you. I really do."

"Now, come on here, Hadley. A good night's sleep is what you needs. A warm glass of milk wouldn't hurt none either."

Hadley rose from the chair and, aided by Mrs. Shorter, left the room, but not without a glance at Josh and Rosanna. Both appeared stricken, staring at her, their brows similar as they frowned, puzzled. Father and daughter.

"Tomorrow," she said to Josh, "you can talk to him tomorrow." And Rosanna looked from Hadley to Josh and back to Hadley. There was more curiosity than concern on her sister's face. For the first time she knew she was deeply hated. It wasn't just sisterly rivalry. It was hatred.

"Come on now," said Mrs. Shorter and Hadley leaned heavily on the woman. She was led as easily as a child.

"Never heard such a fuss in all my days," Mrs. Shorter said when they were upstairs. "Gull, you gone drive your daddy plum crazy. Don't see how come he isn't already."

But Hadley only looked at the woman. Her own body was drained by fear. It was worse than the voices that screamed "mad." She was exhausted. Even talking was too tiring.

If only Oliver were here, she thought. He would hold her until the faces disappeared. She would cling to him in the night until all faded into sleep.

"Here," said Mrs. Shorter, holding out her hand and exposing one white pill.

"What is it?" Hadley asked, knowing how Mrs. Shorter prided herself on the fact she never took medicines of any sort because, she said constantly, she ate prunes every day. She thought everybody in the world should eat prunes every day.

"Anacin. My sister-in-law, Mrs. Shorter? Mrs. Lucille Shorter? She left them thangs here for her head."

Hadley looked up at her. "What's wrong with her head?" She was almost whispering.

"Sick headaches. Some days she can't get out of the bed and she eats them thangs like they was peanuts. Never did have no sense, Lucille. Plum crazy if you want to know the truth."

Hadley took the pill. Maybe it would make her sleep. Tomorrow. Tomorrow. That was all she would think of. Tomorrow. If only she could get through this one night, just this one night, then the remainder of her life would be safe. Oliver would erase everything: this house, the sounds, the gods, the faces that stared at her through the darkness and the voices, the terrible voices who told her she was mad--even Josh's voice would be gone.

Now, this moment, she never wanted to see Josh again. She never wanted to see the house again or the town or the people or Rosanna or Grandfather Bickley or Julia or any of it.

There was only Oliver. Beautiful and safe.

Mrs. Shorter remained with her until she finally slept.