

Always in August

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*by Ann Head*

*ALWAYS IN AUGUST  
FAIR WITH RAIN*

*Always in August*

*by Ann Head*

*Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1961*

All of the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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*TO MY HUSBAND, STAN MORSE, WITH LOVE*

*I drove past the gates of Menlo yesterday. My foot instinctively pressed down on the accelerator, and I kept my eyes straight ahead. But it made no difference how fast I sped or how blind I tried to be. I knew what lay beyond those gates and down the long avenue of oak and pine to where the trees stopped so that sun might shine on pink brick and purple panes, on the roofs and chimneys of Menlo Hall. I knew that behind the house, at the end of the lawn, Coosaw Sound would lie gray and flat and motionless as death beneath the August sun. At the water's edge the marshes would be turning brown and stiff in the August sun. And that was all I wished to know. Nothing and no one could induce me to pass through those gates again. It is a long story. And starts best near its end . . .*

# CHAPTER 1

August in Royal Bay . . . brassy yellow-gray skies, slow colorless tides, hot moist days, nights heavy with silence. Summer's cesspool.

The bad things always happen in August. Whatever potential evil sleeps here, beneath the easy, gentle surface of our days, is nourished, brought to fruit in the heavy, fetid August air.

It was in August that Stark Bartow fell down the high, wide stairway at Menlo and broke his neck. Stark, the Yankee outsider with arrogant Yankee ways and a tongue that had no art for pleasantries. Stark, my childhood idol. Friend, companion, my girlhood love.

It was another August, a later August, when I learned of his widow's love for my husband. Of his for her. Gloria Bartow, born Glory McGill. Childhood friend. Hungry for everything that was mine. She grew taller than I and beautiful, and little by little she took everything that was mine. And more.

August again when Gloria returned to Royal Bay though she'd sworn never to return. She'd sworn it, her hand on the Bible I'd snatched from the bookcase in the study at Menlo and shoved beneath her tilted nose. True, her hand on the Bible had trembled and her voice uttering the promise had wavered, but a promise is a promise, and I had believed her. Secure in this belief, I had made a wall around the past. I lived outside that wall, free and content. And then on a Sunday in August, five years later, the wall came crumbling down around me.

We sat in church that Sunday morning, my husband and I, our two daughters between us, serenely unaware that out at Menlo the shuttered windows were being flung open, the shrouds ripped from the furniture, the weeds cut back from the broad front steps.

Our minister was preaching on the corroding element of fear. I would have done well to have listened. But it was hot, my mind wandered. The girls, too, were restless. Eight-year-old Sarah made rabbits' ears with her handkerchief. Four-year-old Betsy, too young for church but insisting on coming, hummed under her breath. Flagg, my husband, was the only one of us who sat quietly, his eyes resting with good-humored attention on the pulpit. I fell to admiring the set of his eyes, the Grecian cut of his jaw

planing down to frame a firm, vulnerable mouth. A mouth that could change expression from one moment to the next. A boy's mouth, artless and merry. A man's mouth, hard and unreasoning. And once, only once, a clown's mouth, smiling the clown's reasonless smile, wantonly denying his heart's agony.

It wasn't often now that I remembered this. Abruptly I turned my glance away. I looked to the window and through it to the churchyard beyond. Sycamores and moss-weary oaks shaded tarnished stones—Heywards, Barnwells, Rhetts, and brazenly close by, the garishly white-fresh stones of the Bartow plot. Filled now. Father, mother, infant daughter, and lastly but too soon, far too soon . . . son.

It was said that Stark's father bought his way into the ancient churchyard. Wrought-iron gates replacing the old rusted ones and a new steeple erected soon after his death seemed proof enough. They say you could buy anything in Royal Bay during the depression except my grandmother's recipe for shrimp pie and Thaddeus Flagg's family Bible. The girls loved to hear this bit of folklore. It made them feel important, deeply rooted. Two such incorruptible grandparents!

We walked out of church to find faded sunshine and a great black cloud assembling in the east. The air was very still. Voices carried. Even a voice as soft, as breathless, as young Mary Cram's, talking to her mother as she helped her pick her way across the uneven brick pathway ahead of us: "We were going to picnic at Menlo tonight, but now that Mrs. Bartow's back, that's out . . . Oh, I know you never liked the idea of our trespassing, but it never felt like trespassing . . . everything going to seed and she living in Europe . . . We always felt it was ours, almost . . . Anyway, you needn't worry any more. She's back. For good. So we'll have to find another place to go. . . ."

I thought—but it's hard to remember what I thought. Probably that I'd not heard correctly. The mind has its protections. I remember what I felt. I felt giddy. The churchyard swayed and rolled. The sky tilted. When I was able to look at Flagg I did. But he wasn't where I expected him to be. He'd dropped behind to speak to someone. He hadn't heard. Was it possible that he already knew? No. Not possible. I might not understand my husband, but I knew him, his ways. He would lie to me if need be. But he was incapable of pretense. This sort of pretense. Had he known that Gloria was back, the face I'd studied so tenderly in church would not have been serene. Unless, of course, five years had ended the fever's course. But I knew better. His love for Gloria was no infection, routed by time and the proper antidote. It

was a part of him, as much a part as I. He was coming toward me now, eyes still smiling with whatever he and his friend had been saying to each other. He looked to me suddenly so innocent, so unprepared, I wanted to cry some warning. Overhead the cloud had spread; leaves and grass wore the yellow green that precedes a storm, and in the distance thunder rumbled.

“I didn’t mean to keep you waiting,” Flagg said, “but Art had to tell me about a convention in St. Louis. You know how he is once he gets started. Where are the girls?”

“They walked ahead to the car,” I said, and wondered how my voice could sound so natural.

It was our habit to stop at the post office to pick up the mail after church on Sunday, but I hoped, with the sky black overhead and the thunder moving closer, we’d go straight home. There were always a number of after-church mail gatherers at the post office, exchanging greetings and the news of the day. If what the Cram child had said was true, I knew what that news would be.

We didn’t go straight home. We stopped at the post office. I stayed in the car with Sarah. Betsy trailed Flagg inside to riffle the wastebaskets for her “mail.” Parked across the street from us was Miriam Tolles. She waved. I waved. She started to get out, calling to me as she opened the door. It sounded like, “Have you heard?” But might not have been. Just then her husband came out of the post office. With a rueful shrug in my direction, and a nod of her head indicating the approaching storm, Miriam doubled back into their car. The Faye sisters arrived, parking the Cadillac Dorothea had won in a soap-naming contest right behind our station wagon. Dorothea went into the post office. Fanny came to lean in my car window. She is a large woman. I felt as though she filled the window, leaving no air inside the car. Ridiculous. There were other windows.

“I’ve news for you,” she said in her hearty voice. I braced myself against the seat back, knotted my hands in my lap. “You’ve been elected chairman of the bazaar this year,” she said, and tilted back her head and laughed. “That’s what you get for not coming to the last meeting,” she chortled. “You should know they always elect the one not there to protect themselves.”

“I do know,” I said. “I was afraid of that. But Sarah was sick . . .”

“Don’t take it so hard. We’ve got a lot of good workers heading up the committees. Chairman’s the best spot really. Should be in my shoes! I’ve got the white-elephant booth. Everybody unloading their whatnots and doodads. Prickly as pears if they don’t sell.” Her large hand gave my shoulder an

encouraging wallop. “See that you’re at the next meeting. Week from Wednesday at the parish house.” She backed away. Betsy bounded down the post-office steps, arms laden. Flagg followed. As he started the car, I stole a sidewise glance at him. He looked relaxed, cheerful.

We reached home just as the storm broke. Our house, like most of the houses on Bay Street, faces the water. The front door can be reached only on foot by a tiny path winding between the camellia bushes that were my mother’s special pride. It is the back door that faces the street, and it was this entrance that we made for when the rain started. The girls scampered ahead of us. Sarah, safe inside, held the door open. “‘The sky is falling,’ cried Chicken Little,” she said, laughing through the rivulets of drops that ran from her yellow bright hair.

“The sky is falling, the sky is falling.” The lines ran through my head as I prepared our Sunday dinner, still haunted me as later we drove out to Pritchard’s Island to pay our weekly call on Flagg’s mother. The sun shone again palely; the rain-drenched foliage gave off a musky odor. Through laurel woods and over causeways, it was a drive I often enjoyed. I enjoyed the Sunday unity after the week’s diverse activities. But today there was no room in my thoughts for quiet contemplation. There was only confusion and fear. “The sky is falling!”

Flagg’s mother rose from a hammock under the sycamore tree to greet us, spilling a cat and interrupting the sleep of two beagle hounds. “How nice!” she called. “Is it already Sunday again?” Spare and spry and intensely busy with her gardening, her canning, her animals, her weaving, she has become, since the death of Flagg’s father, shockingly vague about the things that no longer interest her—the time of day, the day of the week, the daily paper among them. I am sure she loved Colonel Thorpe, Flagg’s father, and admired him enormously, but he was much older than she, autocratic and overbearing at times. Her behavior since his death has often made me think of a child playing hooky from school, amusing herself in just the ways that she wishes. Reveling in it.

“Sunday!” Flagg teased. “It’s Christmas! Hadn’t you realized?”

“Oh, you!” she chastised, but her smile was sheepish, and I think, had it not been for the smoglike August air, she would almost have believed him. “Whatever the day, I do manage to keep the seasons straight,” she declared.

The girls had their own separate interests on this island that had so irrevocably molded their father’s youth. But they were of a different genre. Not for them the creeks and marshes, the ocean beyond, the hunted marsh

hen, the routed snake, the savage freedom of a wayward boy whom neither words nor beatings could tame. Sarah remained with us just long enough to make her manners and then went off to the cove to hunt shells. Betsy, remaining not that long, scampered off to the tree house built by the children of Peaches Brown, who, with two other colored families, were the only other inhabitants of the island.

Watching Sarah go, Mrs. Thorpe said, "She is very like you, Lucy." Her voice was warm with approval. An accolade. I couldn't agree with the observation. Sarah is fragile, thoughtful, a creature of whimsy and hidden resources, often a stranger to us all. However, I welcomed Mrs. Thorpe's approval. I hadn't always had it. In the very beginning, yes. She'd been pleased that Flagg, the unruly one, had chosen so respectable, so prosaic a wife. Had hoped, I'm sure, that my conventional upbringing, my wifely expectations, would work some magic with his obstinate heart, little guessing that I loved him as he was, had been, might be. Her disappointment had been acute when a few months after we were married he turned down a promising offer from a college classmate in New York in favor of remaining a "shrimper" in Royal Bay. The term "shrimper" had been hers and represented the epitome of all the ways in which he'd disappointed his parents. Though at the time he'd owned his own shrimp boat, captained it himself, thought of himself as a man with a trade which he hoped to burgeon into a business, to her he was still the creek boy who never came home to meals on time and had to be caned to school every winter. She had expected his wife to change all that. His wife had failed. For many years I felt her scorn of me. Now, belying these memories, she tucked her arm in mine as we walked to the house. Flagg, walking ahead of us, whistled a gay melody from *Threepenny Opera*. Overhead the rain-washed sky seemed serene and infinitely far away and the utterances of a youthfully unreliable tongue overheard in the churchyard that morning improbable. Gloria couldn't have returned. She wouldn't dare!

Did I really believe that? Almost. We stayed on at Pritchard's Island for an early supper. Blueberries smothered in the cream supplied by Peaches Brown's cow, crusty French bread straight out of Mrs. Thorpe's oven. We ate on the porch. Mrs. Thorpe read us letters from Flagg's brothers, her two "respectable" sons, army career men like their father before them. Flagg pretended to listen, his eyes anxiously probing the southwest sky. The six-o'clock news had reported a hurricane making up in the Caribbean. August was always riddled with such reports. The Caribbean was a thousand miles away. I couldn't share his anxiety, though I did understand it. Even the trailing edge of such a storm had to be treated with respect. It would mean

boarding up the packing sheds, sending the boats inland up the river for safe harbor. At best the loss of a week's catch. Crucial at this time of year.

Betsy slept in my lap on the drive home and had to be carried up to bed and wrestled sluggishly into nightclothes. Flagg helped Sarah look up and mount her new shell trophies and then settled down in the living room with the paper. I tucked Sarah in for the night and started downstairs. The telephone rang. Though Flagg was much nearer the telephone than I, I called that I would get it. My voice sounded shrill. In my haste I almost stumbled against the newel post. It was as though this anonymous ringing was something I'd been expecting, waiting for . . .

"Lucy?" The voice was Miriam's. Miriam Tolles, my friend, Gloria's friend. Unaware that there was any discrepancy in the two facts.

"I know this is an ungodly hour to be calling," Miriam said, "but I'm going out of town for a few days tomorrow, and I wanted to get a small party set up for next Saturday. Not a party, really, just Gloria's closest friends to welcome her back. Supper. Sevenish. Can you and Flagg come?"

My hand holding the receiver had begun to tremble so violently that I could almost feel the instrument bruising my ear.

"Are you still there?" Miriam said.

"Yes. Quite." I could scarcely force my voice above a whisper. I cleared my throat. "I'll have to see, Miriam." My normal voice again! "I'll have to look at my calendar."

"Well, do try. You and Flagg were at the top of the list Gloria gave me for the party, and you've actually known her longer than any of us."

I could have protested this. Miriam and I were both in the fifth grade when Gloria moved to Royal Bay and attended that same fifth grade. It was just that I was the one who had made a friend of Glory McGill who lived over her father's photography shop on Palm Street. Miriam had scarcely known she existed.

"I'll try," I said. I put the receiver back on its hook. From the living room Flagg asked, "Who was that?"

"Miriam," I said. The mirror above the hall table warned me to say no more until I could compose myself. The eyes that stared out at me from a pinched, ashen face were dark with anger. Wide with fear. I walked out to the piazza's edge and leaned against the rail and looked out at the lacquer-still waters of Royal Bay and the hot-misted stars that hung low above it.

Presently the trembling stopped and my heart resumed its normal beat. Flagg came out to the piazza looking for me. I turned, the words already half formed on my tongue. I would tell him that Gloria had returned to Menlo and that I was afraid. I would tell him more, the whole bitter story locked in my heart for all these years. Ever since the night of Stark Bartow's death. There was no longer reason not to tell him. Gloria had broken her promise. I was ready to break mine.

Unaware of my despair, Flagg put his arms around me, bent his head to mine, murmured tenderly, drowsily, against my ear. Silenced by his desire, I could only cling to him, suddenly grateful for the ignorance that made him, for this one more night, mine.

## CHAPTER 2

I slept fitfully, tortured by dreams. I dreamed that Stark and I sat under the oak at the water's edge at Menlo. Sky and water were an October blue; the air smelled of leaf smoke and pine. He was reading aloud, something of Tennyson's, he said, and while I heard his voice rising and falling in powerful cadence, I couldn't make out the words. All at once he leaped to his feet. "You aren't listening," he cried, a boy's voice cracking into adolescence. "You are just a child, a poor deaf child." He hurled the book into Coosaw Sound and walked away. Looking after him, I saw that he was a man grown and that Gloria walked beside him, her black heavy hair hanging loose against his shoulder.

I dreamed I went to Menlo to ask Gloria why she had come back, how she had dared. I dreamed she came out of the house to meet me, stood, her hand resting lightly, possessively, against one of the great white columns that supported the roof of Menlo Hall. She was wearing blood-red roses in a crown about her head, and her eyes were cold with triumph. When I opened my mouth to speak, no words came, only tears, gushing geyserlike from my throat.

Flagg roused me from the nightmare. "You are crying," he said. I put my hand to my eyes. They were dry. Flagg turned on the light between our beds and looked at me. "What were you dreaming, honey?"

This was not the time, the place, but how arrange a time and place to do violence to the heart?

"I dreamed that I went to Menlo," I said, "to see Gloria." I turned my head to look at him. "I dreamed this because she is there. Now. She's come back to make Menlo her home."

The light between us was dim, a small shaded lamp, but light enough to show me my husband's face suddenly stripped of tenderness. Sea-blue eyes darkening to the color of night looked, from a great distance, into mine. "You are still dreaming," he said slowly, deliberately, as though he really believed it. "I thought you'd put all that behind you."

"I had. I did. But I'm not dreaming now, Flagg." I turned my head away, away from the light, away from him. "Gloria is at Menlo. Miriam is having a party for her Saturday. We are invited."

He was silent then. I couldn't guess his thoughts. I lay, my arm flung across my eyes, and waited for him to speak, but he said nothing. Presently he turned off the light. And with that same hand reached to pat my shoulder. Did he think to console me? And for what? I lay and watched a sluggish sun rise to a tired sky. In the bed next to mine Flagg, too, lay sleepless but still, his head turned away from me. I wondered if his thoughts, like mine, turned backward, retracing the various paths that had led us all to this final bitter reckoning. There was peace, almost, in going back, if I went back far enough. Back to Lucy Fenwick and Glory McGill.

My mother, a sweet and charitable woman, never openly disapproved the friendship, though there were times when it must have troubled her. My father, a fiery democrat given to speeches on freedom, equality, and the rights of man, I think rather cherished his daughter's affinity for the little Irish waif from Palm Street, as he sometimes referred to Glory.

I was ten when the McGills first moved to Royal Bay. They came from somewhere in Georgia and before that from somewhere in Alabama. Glory liked to boast that her father had "itching feet." Whatever she said about her father was always said with enormous pride, as though whatever it was—"Money slips through his fingers" or "Pop never could work for anybody"—set him apart from the ordinary. Made him special. Such was her conviction that I often found myself comparing my own father, a district judge, unfavorably.

Glory was assigned the desk next to mine in Miss Rumble's fifth grade. Her very first day there I shared my lunch box with her. She hadn't brought one, and she looked hungry. Skinny in those days, with wide green-blue eyes and that mass of black hair that she'd not yet learned how to manage, I thought she might be a gypsy. It would be an adventure to know a gypsy. It would be something to tell Stark Bartow when he came home for Christmas. He always had so much to tell and I so little. Glory and I sat on swings munching the chicken sandwiches from my lunch box. I said:

"Are you a gypsy?"

"I'm Irish. My pop is. My mother's from Alabama. Where are you from?"

"Here. Royal Bay."

"I mean before that?"

"Nowhere. Just here."

“Goodness!” Glory paused between bites to toss back her hair which was getting in the way of her sandwich. “Why did you think I was a gypsy?”

“Your hair.”

“I’m glad that’s all. There was a camp of gypsies near where we used to live. They were raggedy and dirty. My mother wouldn’t let me play with them.”

“I guess I’ve never seen a real gypsy,” I amended, “only in pictures. I thought they were all like Carmen.”

“Who’s she?”

“A gypsy girl in a play. She’s very pretty and dies in the end.” My information was secondhand. Stark, who’d seen the opera in New York, had given a glowing account and shown me the program with Carmen’s picture on the cover.

“I’ve never seen a play.” She sounded wistful. Though I’d never seen a play either, it seemed no time to admit it.

“It’s different from the movies and twice as real,” I quoted Stark. “But personally I like movies best,” I added, wishing to change the subject before I ran out of material.

“I don’t,” Glory said. “Some day I’m going to be an actress. Pop says I’m a born actress. Do you like to play paper dolls?”

“I don’t know.” My playmates leaned to dolls. One Christmas an aunt had given me a hand-painted family with complete hand-painted wardrobe, but my mother, declaring they were priceless, had put them away. Until this moment I’d forgotten all about them.

“Well, you either do or you don’t,” Glory said. Her sandwich finished, she stood up, brushing her hands together to get the crumbs off, running a small pointed tongue across her lips, much like a cat cleaning up after a bowl of milk. “And, if you do, come home with me after school, and I’ll show you mine. I’ve got loads, enough for both of us.” Without waiting for an answer, she dashed away after a stray ball someone had thrown.

It was a week or two before I did go home with Glory. My mother, hearing about my new friend, didn’t withhold permission; she simply found an abundance of things to occupy my time in the afternoons. But I persisted. And finally one rainy October day after school Glory and I, holding hands, paddled downtown to the photography shop on Palm Street. The property, before Mr. McGill leased it, had been a beauty parlor, and the odor of

cellulose and burned-out flash bulbs still mingled pleasantly with that of perfumed soaps. Photographs of exotically posed young women hung from one wall; from another myriads of toothless babies smiled down at us. The shop was empty. Above the counter hung a bell, and on the counter just beneath it a placard with an arrow pointing upward commanded "Please Ring."

"Come along," Glory said impatiently, "and I'll show you where Pop does his real work, his *life's* work." She hustled me importantly through a curtained doorway at the back of the shop and into a big bare room. In the center of it, encircled in the light from an enormous unshaded bulb which hung from the ceiling, a small, thin, graying man, his back to us, stood before an easel painting with rapid, feverish strokes on a canvas almost as large as he. Letting go my hand, Glory tiptoed up behind him. "Boo!" she cried, tossing her arms around his neck and twirling him about to face me.

"This is the friend I told you about, Pop. Lucy, Lucy Fenwick." He smiled and held out his hand, blue-green eyes sparkling down at me, a wiry hand clasping mine.

"And just as pretty as you said. Welcome, child, welcome to our home." What matter that the hand holding mine could use a scrubbing or that his smile carried with it a scent of wine? "Welcome to our home," he'd said as though I were twenty instead of ten.

Giddily I curtsied. Laughing, Glory said, "Is that what they do in Royal Bay? I'll have to learn it."

I flushed. "Not everyone. It's just that my mother . . ."

"Never mind her teasing," Mr. McGill soothed me. "Glory has a way of laughing when she wishes to hide her true feelings. Now run along, the two of you. Glory's mother will be wondering where you are. Tell her I'll be up when the pot is on."

Glory hustled me out of the circle of light and through the dim, shadowy room. My eyes, grown accustomed to the distribution of light and shadow, saw that against the walls leaned row on row of paintings curiously alike. Ships all of them, plowing stormy seas. I know now just how bad they were, those meticulous boats copied from magazine pictures, those curling, foam-topped waves as lifeless as the canvases that held them. I know now. But then I thought them beautiful.

Stairs bent upward, bringing us to a small, crowded room which I judged to be the parlor of the McGill apartment. Two lace-curtained windows

looked out on the back yards of the houses on High Street; a sofa, two armchairs, an upright piano, and a table holding a vase of artificial peonies crowded the room. Somewhere in the back of the apartment a sewing machine hummed, and from somewhere else came the mouth-watering smell of cooking pot roast. Glory closed the door behind us with a bang, and abruptly the sewing machine was silenced and a flutey voice called, "That you, Glory?"

"Yes, and I've brought my friend!" Again I was hustled along down a small narrow hall and into a big sunny room that faced out on Palm Street. Through its windows you looked square down into Mr. Brody's shoeshop if you wished. Or straight across into the windows of "Royal Bay School of the Dance." This room I first assumed to be the kitchen because of the stove. It was much more than that. It was, I was to learn, dining room, sewing room, and Glory's playroom. Her own sleeping quarters were too small to house the families of paper dolls and their elaborate shoe-box homes. Mrs. McGill, in a flurry of getting out teacups and cookies, turned.

"You didn't tell me it was today you were bringing her, or I'd have had all this ready and waiting." Though it was to Glory she spoke, she looked at me. Wide, childlike eyes in a wan, tired face regarded me with a mixture of curiosity and caution.

"How could I tell you when I didn't know myself?" Glory retorted. There was a corrective sharpness in her voice. I waited uneasily for the reprimand my own mother would inflict were I to speak to her in such a way.

"It's just that I want your friend to have a real nice time," Mrs. McGill said apologetically. "Come, dear, take off your things." She fluttered to help me with my coat buttons. "Such nice goods, real tweed." Lovingly her hands caressed the material. "This didn't come out of no Royal Bay shop, I'll wager."

"Any, Mom, *any* shop." Glory, flushing, tossed coat and hat on the nearest chair.

"Any, no, what's the difference? One thing I know is clothes," Mrs. McGill said stoutly, but her eyes misted and, putting my coat down, she turned abruptly away, began arranging cookies on a blue-and-white willowware plate. All at once contrite, Glory gave her mother a fierce hug. "You do know more about clothes than anyone in the world," she cried, "and some day, you'll see, when Pop sells his paintings you'll have the finest money can buy."

“Satin, brocade, yards and yards of real Irish lace,” Mrs. McGill laughed softly. “Ah, Glory, what a dreamer you are. Your father too. Will you call him now that tea’s ready?”

It is hard for me to recall, from this distance, the enchantment that the apartment above the photography shop held for me. I turn to the diary I kept at the time for illumination. I read, “I have a new friend. Her name is Glory. I went home with her after school. We had tea. Her mother and father too. He is a painter. He is going to be famuss. Her mother lets us do anything we want. We played paper dolls. Her paper dolls are cut out of catalogs. They only have one dress. They are lords and ladys and counts and countesses. We pretend we are them. Glory has a castle. She made it with boxes. Her father painted it. The castle has a gatehouse. I lived in the gatehouse. We pretended it was a castle too. Glory is going to be an actress when she grows up. Glory’s mother gave me cookies to bring home. Her father kissed my hand. I felt like company. I got home late. Mommy was worried and cross. If she doesn’t let me go back I’ll die. It’s like going away on a trip. Far away!”

Perhaps that was it. Far away. Such a distant world from mine. My home held no such enchantment for Glory. She came to our house for the first time on my eleventh birthday, carrying her invitation in her hand as though she expected it to be taken up at the door. She wore a ruffled pink organdy dress with a large pink bow in back. Her unruly hair had been twisted up and back and secured with bejeweled combs at the sides. She looked years older than any of us and as out of place among our assorted velveteen jumpers and tailored silk blouses as a chorus girl at a garden party. She was late. We were in the midst of a game of musical chairs when she got there. She hesitated in the doorway, looking perplexed and anxious, until the music stopped and I was free to go to her. Wordlessly she shoved a tissue-wrapped something into my hand and wordlessly allowed me to take her across the room to meet my mother.

“So you are Lucy’s new friend.” Inwardly I prayed Glory had missed the flicker of astonishment in my mother’s eyes. “So glad you could come today.”

“Pleased to meet you, I’m sure,” Glory said, and stepping back a pace, solemnly, stiffly, placed one foot behind the other and executed a curtsy. That accomplished, she appeared to relax. Certainly she joined into the games with gusto. Won the prize for pinning the donkey’s tail. Led the relay race. Ate sumptuously of cupcakes, ice cream, and candies. I thought she was as unaware as she’d made the rest of us of what she wore or that it made any difference. It wasn’t until I walked with her to the hall to get her coat

that I learned it had all been an act. In the hall she turned on me, eyes so full of anger, of pain, I couldn't believe it.

"Why didn't you tell me it wasn't a *real* party?" she hissed. "Not that I care what your silly old friends think. Not one hoot I don't. It's Mom I care about. That's all. She stayed up all night getting this dress finished. Oh, I had plenty I could have worn if I'd known. If you'd told me. And you can just tell your friends so if you've any gumption." She yanked herself into her coat and dashed out the door and away, leaving me too dumfounded to call after her.

I spent a restless night, sure that I'd alienated her forever. However, at school the next day she was friendly, cheerful, full of plans for a new catalogue of paper dolls she'd inherited from Hagood's dry-goods store. It was as though the party, the scene in the hall, had never happened. But it was a long time before she consented to come to my house again. And then only because my mother threatened to stop my visits to the McGills unless they were reciprocated. Though this was presented to me as a simple matter of good manners, I think now that my mother was growing increasingly anxious about the friendship. The afternoons spent over the photography shop, playing paper dolls with Glory, rummaging through Mrs. McGill's closet of "creations," or listening to Mr. McGill hold forth over a bottle of wine on the paintings of the old masters as though he considered me a worthy recipient of his opinions, were making me indifferent to the friends and pursuits I'd enjoyed in the past. Pale in comparison were those days when I'd romped about the neighborhood with my friends playing hide-and-seek, prisoner's base, fox and hounds. Even Stark and the long, contented summer afternoons at Menlo seemed faraway, unreal. I was glad that this was so. I had missed Stark terribly at first. Would undoubtedly have missed him still were it not for Glory. The young heart is quickly distracted.

He came home for Christmas. He had grown two inches and his voice had begun to change, but I saw no change in him. He was still the stern, serious Yankee boy who read poetry, argued religion, took me riding with him down the paths and across the meadows of Menlo, let me once in a while beat him at tennis. He was still my idol.

Mr. Bartow often sought my father's legal advice in matters involving his mines in Pennsylvania. To say that they were friends would be stretching a point. My father disapproved of Mr. Bartow's politics, his "imported" friends. It also grieved my father to think of Menlo, oldest, most hallowed plantation in all of Royal Bay County, in the hands of "a Yankee coal tycoon." Yet between these two, the handsome, portly Yankee upstart and

the southern judge, there existed a certain respect, a compatible sharpness of wit, that had they been lesser individualists might have passed for friendship.

The Pennsylvania mines must have been giving considerable trouble that Christmas, for my father went often to Menlo. Most of the time he took me with him. We would drive out in the early afternoon. Slowly. My father liked to look about him, pointing out a covey of quail here, a good pond for ducks there. The avenue of trees that led up to the house always elicited some fresh nugget of Menlo's past history. Though I was never any good at remembering dates and distant historical names and places, I could trace the origins of Menlo, names and dates from Jonathan Menlo, who had built it as a summer home for his family in 1802, right on through to Leath Ferris, great-great-grandson of Jonathan, whose only present claim to the home of his forebears was the gardener's cottage and the salary that went with tending the vast lawns and gardens that under his passionate care had become famous. My favorite was not the story of the crippled Abby Menlo who eloped with Eugene Ferris, tutor to her brothers, or of the son she bore who grew up to rebuild Menlo from the ravages of the War between the States and whose only pleasure was to beat his wife, for which, considering how hard he struggled, no one condemned him. Though his wife was said to have been a fine and pious woman who must have suffered greatly. My favorite was the story of Ferris, the gardener. The Menlo blood was running thin by the time he was born of a father who clerked in Hardwich's grocery store and his waitress wife. However, his grandparents still lived at Menlo then, though his grandfather's job as superintendent of roads was scarcely enough to keep the place up. His grandfather, grandmother, and two aunts lived in the downstairs; the upstairs was closed. In winter the only heat was from the wood fires in the fireplaces, and in the summer they were hard put to keep up with the screens that kept the mosquitoes out. Menlo was dirty, unpainted, and only half tenanted, but young Leath Ferris, living in a shingled bungalow in the town, thought it elegant and beautiful. The faded portraits, the dusty shelves and shelves of books told him that the Ferrises had once been cultured, successful people. Menlo was all he had to remind him of this. His grandfather, a bitter, frail old man who blamed everything on the Civil War which had been fought, finished, and cleared away before he was ever born, found consolation in the bottle and in relating stories of past glories, some of them true, to his eagerly receptive grandson.

The boy, Leath Ferris, lived for the weekends when he could escape the weary bickering of his parents. Every Saturday morning he bicycled out to Menlo where he stayed until late Sunday afternoon, playing in the woods

and fields, listening to his grandfather's stories, helping his grandmother polish what of the family silver had not been sold since the war. His grandfather was always saying, "Someday, boy, this place will be yours. Lock, stock, and barrel. You'll be the fifth generation of us to live here." Proud in this thought, the boy looked down on the boys in his neighborhood. He became solitary and secretive. His hobby was a small garden behind the bungalow in town where he experimented with flowers, shrubs, even grass. He was not a good student. He had little or no interest in books, but he soon found that anything he touched his hand to would grow the better for it. Someday he intended to make Menlo the most beautiful place in the county! Someday Menlo would be his, lock, stock, and barrel!

He was twelve years old when his grandfather sold Menlo to the rich Yankee from Pittsburgh. For two weeks after the transaction his grandfather stayed drunk. When Leath heard the news, he rode out to Menlo on his bicycle. He beat on the locked door of his grandfather's room until his knuckles bled, but all he got for answer was his grandfather's drunken cursing.

I once tried to tell Stark this story, but he didn't want to hear it. He didn't like to think of a time when Menlo had not been his. Nor did he like to think that there was more behind the gardener's hostility toward him than simple crotchiness. He said, "The trouble with you Southerners is that you live in the past. Don't forget it took my father's Yankee dollars to make it what it is today!"

Once my father and I arrived at Menlo we would go our separate ways, he up the white steps and into Mr. Bartow's pine-paneled study, and I in search of Stark. I might find him at the stables or in the greenhouse, puttering over one of his experiments in crossbreeding while Ferris stood dubiously by, relishing, it would seem, each failure. How Ferris must have resented him, the young prince of Menlo, committing outrages with his flowers while he dared not interfere.

One day I almost didn't find Stark at all. He wasn't at the stables or in the greenhouses. He wasn't down at the point under the big oak where we'd wiled away so many a summer afternoon. It was, I thought, much too nice a day to find him indoors, but I went looking for him there. Always before when I'd gone into the house it had been either with my father or Stark. It didn't occur to me to ring the doorbell. I just walked in and down the hall. I meant to go to the kitchen and ask one of the maids where Stark was, but as I passed the dining room I heard voices, one of them Stark's. I hesitated, wondering if I should push the door open or beat a hasty retreat. I heard

Stark say, “You mean to tell me you rowed all the way from Pritchard’s looking for duck? I thought you always hunt duck from a blind.”

“There’s no better blind than a mudbank with tall marsh growing on it. They’re a lot easier to find than duck. Time I spot a duck is time enough.” The voice, like Stark’s, was young, a boy’s voice, beginning to change, but the accent was different, soft, the low-country speech I was accustomed to. I pushed the door open.

“Hello, there,” Stark said. “Come in and see what the tide brought in. Lucy, this is Flagg.” The other boy looked up from a plate heaping with meat and potatoes long enough to grin amiably. To say:

“She knows me, I reckon.” With that acknowledgment he turned his attention to food. Know him? Who didn’t. The wild Thorpe boy. I’d seen him at school. Tousled hair, shirttail always half out, and like as not creek mud caking the cuffs of his trousers. They said there wasn’t a creek or sand bar in Royal Bay he couldn’t find his way to before he was ten. They said twice his parents had sent him off to school and twice he’d run away. They said his parents were fine, educated people, but they’d never be able to do anything with “that one.”

“He ran aground at the point,” Stark explained to me, “and broke an oar trying to push off. Lucky I happened along.”

“Especially with all this good eating going to waste,” Flagg shoveled in a forkful and winked at me. “Nothing like being shipwrecked!” Crinkled blue eyes asked me to join in the joke. But I felt that somehow the joke, whatever it was, was in poor taste. Besides, I was annoyed at having our afternoon taken up by this callow creek boy. Prim with disapproval, I folded my hands in my lap and refused to be drawn in. Stark scarcely appeared to notice. He seemed inordinately impressed with his new friend. After Flagg had cleaned his plate, I trailed after them down to the boathouse where Stark lent him a brand-new pair of oars. From there we went to the point to wave him off. As far as I know he never thanked Stark for either food or oars. He seemed to take his rescue as much for granted as he did the mishap that had occasioned it. As we walked back to the house, Stark said:

“You’re mighty quiet today. What’s the matter? Don’t you like him?”

“Not especially. I don’t really know him.”

“Well, I like him. I intend to look him up someday.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. He interests me. He’s different.”

“I guess mostly he scares me,” I said. “Anybody that willful!”

“What’s wrong with being willful?”

“Oh, I don’t know. He just scares me, that’s all. Now can’t we forget him?”

I didn’t see Glory until school started again. I hadn’t realized how I’d missed her. How I’d missed my visits to the apartment on Palm Street. I found there was much I’d forgotten in the space of a few weeks—the warmth of the kitchen, the starchily sweet smell of the cottons and organdies Mrs. McGill worked with, the odor of field peas cooked with fat back, the way Mrs. McGill had, as she pored over a new fashion magazine, of sighing and clucking her tongue, the eager, hopeful timbre of Mr. McGill’s voice when he spoke of his work, Glory’s airy assurance that someday she’d be a famous actress simply because her father had said so. It was a place of hope. Of fabulous dreams. I’d forgotten, too, how richly I was treated there. Always an honored guest. So different from Menlo where I was simply “Stark’s little friend” and seldom encountered the sad, austere woman who was his mother or exchanged more than a word or two with his father.

The McGills welcomed me back after the holidays as though I’d been on some long, delightful journey. Somehow Glory had heard that I’d been to Menlo, that the young Bartow boy was my friend.

“Is it true the place is like a palace? Twelve bedrooms and as many baths?”

“Eight,” I amended.

“And all the rooms filled with flowers summer and winter?”

“From the greenhouses.”

“Greenhouses?”

“Little glass houses where you can grow roses in winter, chrysanthemums in summer if you like.”

“This Mrs. Bartow,” Mrs. McGill said, “is she queer like they say?”

“Oh no!” I protested loyally. “Just because she doesn’t go out much doesn’t mean she’s queer. She lost a little girl . . . years ago . . . it makes her sad. But she’s very nice to me. She even had me for tea once,” I added proudly. If my boasting implied an intimacy that I’d never truly felt, it was

at least true that Stark had told me that his mother liked me, that I reminded her a little of her own daughter.

“I bet she dresses like a queen,” Mrs. McGill said dreamily.

She dressed, as nearly as I could remember, much as my own mother did—tweeds in winter, simple cottons in summer—but I was afraid Mrs. McGill might be hurt were I to say so.

“I do know she sends to New York for everything.”

“Clothes! Greenhouses!” Mr. McGill exclaimed impatiently. “I’ve heard a Copley portrait hangs in the library. Did you see it?”

“There are quite a few portraits,” I said. Beginning to be a little embarrassed by this probing, I didn’t add that they’d most of them come with the house and more resembled Mr. Ferris, the gardener, than any Bartow ever born.

“It sounds ‘marvy’!” Glory clapped her hands together, rested her chin thoughtfully on the tips of her fingers. “I can almost see it. Someday I must. You’ll take me there someday, won’t you, Lucy?”

## CHAPTER 3

What if I'd never taken Glory to Menlo? What then? I believe she'd have found a way. Lovers do. Not that I think she'd already fallen in love with the place. Sight unseen. But the longing was there, the shapeless skeleton longing. Had she not lived with longing always? Known no other climate? The dream was there. It only needed a name. The name was Menlo. I think even without me to hasten the day, the day would have come when she traveled the avenue out to where, lonely and serene, the afternoon sun turning the old bricks lavender pink, stood Menlo Hall. And however late or soon that day, the story would have been, in essence, the same.

But it was I who took her there, or rather my father, who, having business to do with Mr. Bartow, asked us along for the ride. It was a summer afternoon a year or more after Glory had asked me to take her. I thought she'd forgotten all about Menlo and her urgent request. Hoped she had. She never spoke of it, and I, finding a meeting too difficult to arrange, never spoke of it either. However, she'd not forgotten. She had, she confessed, wished on every first star and tucked the wish into her prayers at night. "You see," she explained solemnly, "all my other dreams, being a great actress, living in a palace, are so far away sometimes they seem almost out of reach, but Menlo is close. Seeing it, I can make it real. And then who knows?"

She was stunned by the unexpectedness, the casualness of the invitation, stunned and frightened. She wanted to go home and change her dress, but my father couldn't or wouldn't wait for such trifles. He hustled us into the car as we were, cotton dresses limp from the heat, sandals scuffed with sand from a walk to Marty's soda parlor and back. I told Glory it wouldn't matter. We weren't likely to see anyone but Stark, and he never noticed what you had on. Still she was nervous on the drive out. She combed her hair. Straightened her dress a dozen times. Wiped sand from her shoes. This done, she drew a little mirror from her pocketbook, looked into it, glanced sidewise at me and back again as though she compared what she saw. I thought it silly of her. There was no comparison. Glory with that luxuriant black hair that swung in rhythm when she walked and eyes green-blue, the color of the ocean in December. Granted I had nice skin and eyes that sometimes people remarked on, but neither atoned for the freckles across my

nose or my flat chest which hadn't even begun to develop. It troubled me that I still looked more boy than girl.

As we turned into the gates of Menlo, drove down the rutted road where oak trees formed an arch above our heads, Glory forgot her nervousness. She caught her breath, leaned forward excitedly. We left the avenue behind, turned the curve that brought us in sight of the house. Glory let her breath out in a sigh. "It's perfect," she breathed. "I declare I never saw so much that was beautiful all at once. Never in my whole life."

Trancelike, she climbed out of the car, slowly turning her head this way and that, drinking in the green sweep of lawn, the sound beyond it, the woods to the right, fields to the left, and finally, tilting her head upward, the tall white columns of the house.

"It's like coming home," she said, her voice hardly above a whisper.

Abashed by an ecstasy which I found hard to comprehend—to me Menlo was Stark, the horses we rode, the dogs we played with, the big tree at the point we rested under with our books and our long, long arguments—I said, "Wait until you see Stark's mare and the Doberman puppies."

Glory didn't hear. She was looking with dismay after my father as he went into the house.

"Can't we go inside? I'll die if I don't see inside!" She looked at me beseechingly.

"Oh, you'll probably see inside," I said impatiently, "but now let's go and find Stark." I grasped her hand and together we ran across the lawn, around the house, and to the stable. Stark, wearing riding clothes, came out of Bareback's stall. I'd never seen him through any eyes but my own, but now I tried to see him through the eyes of Glory. I hadn't noticed before that he'd grown up to his high, stubborn forehead, that his long, arrogant nose fitted now the almost man's face, and that he wore his clothes with careless elegance. Stark acknowledged my overeager introductions with a perfunctory nod, a curt "How do you do," and, turning to me, said excitedly, "Come and see! Bareback has foaled! The prettiest colt you ever saw. Father says he's mine. Would you like to name him? You have an ear for that sort of thing." As he spoke he pulled me into Bareback's stall. Timidly Glory followed us.

Bareback wouldn't let us near the sleek all-legs little creature, but I could see he was prettily marked and that for such a young colt he stood

sturdily. “I could name an ugly horse,” I said, “but I’d be afraid to name this one, Stark, afraid I mightn’t do him justice.”

“The devil with justice,” Stark said. “All I want is inspiration. I was counting on you.” Pointing, he began to recite, “Round-hoofed, short-jointed, fetlocks shag and long. Broad breast, full eye, small head, and nostril wide . . .” Laughing, he broke off. “He’s all of that and more. Come now, a name should be simple.”

“What were you reciting from?”

“Shakespeare—*Venus and Adonis*. You should know—we read half of it last summer.”

“Not that half. But it does give me an idea. Why not Adonis?”

“That wasn’t the horse’s name, but it should do.”

“If he were mine,” Glory said, “I’d call him Star.”

I’m afraid in our excitement we’d forgotten Glory all together. “Why Star?” Stark said politely.

“Oh, I don’t know. I guess because I’ve always wanted a horse named Star. I think it’s a pretty name. Don’t you?”

“Not especially,” Stark said. “Not for this horse at any rate. And anyhow, I want Lucy to name him.”

“Well, it’s your horse!” Rebuffed, Glory flounced out of the stable.

“Damn it!” Stark said. “I suppose I hurt her feelings. But she asked me, and I told her. Who is she anyhow? Did you have to bring her?”

“She’s my very best friend,” I said stoutly. “I brought her because I thought you’d like each other. I still think you would if you’d just try.”

“I don’t think people should *try* to like each other. It either happens or it doesn’t. Anything else is hypocrisy.” He wasn’t really thinking about Glory any more, but I refused to be led into one of his long, esoteric arguments, much as I enjoyed them.

“Come,” I said. “We’ve got to go and find Glory. You don’t have to like her if you’ll just be nice to her.”

When we got outside Glory was nowhere in sight. I found her in the greenhouse. Stark, who’d quarreled with Ferris that morning over something to do with the death of a favorite camellia bush, remained outside. Glory sat

on an upturned barrel top, talking to Mr. Ferris. Against her cheek she held an orchid.

“Look, Lucy,” she cried excitedly, “my first orchid! Mr. Ferris gave it to me. Isn’t he sweet? He says if I put it in the icebox when I get home it’ll last for days!”

For the first time since I’d known him Mr. Ferris smiled. Or seemed to. His thin lips moved outward, pushing back the sullen lines that held them in place; his sad, dark, hooded eyes appeared, almost, to brighten.

“You must have made an enormous hit,” Stark said crossly when we rejoined him outside. “He hates people pattering in his greenhouse.”

“Oh, it was easy.” Glory laughed, delighted with her conquest. “You see, I knew Menlo once belonged to him—”

“Not to him!” Stark interrupted angrily. “To his grandfather. And you should have seen it! Practically falling down. If my father hadn’t got it just when he did, there’d have been nothing worth saving.”

“Well, anyway,” Glory continued, unperturbed, “I knew all about that, and so I pretended at first I thought he was Mr. Bartow himself—in gardening clothes. When he told me he was the gardener, huffy as you please, I went into ecstasies about how beautiful Menlo was and all because of him. Then I asked lots of questions about his flowers and pretended to listen to the answers.”

Glory had completely recovered her confidence. Nothing would do but the orchid must go into water at once. I saw through this ruse to get into the house and rather admired her for it. Stark left us in the front hall while he went to find a vase.

The moment he was out of sight Glory ran on tiptoe, peering into the parlors, the library, up the wide stairs to the landing where the stairwell divided to make two stairs going in opposite directions. I watched nervously, hoping no one would see her. Soon she returned to me, two bright spots of color staining her cheeks.

“Lordy, it’s grand!” she breathed. “Those stairs! And that window at the landing, and then two pairs of stairs going sideways and up and up. But Lordy, they’re high and steep, like you could climb clear to heaven if you tried. It’d take some learning for a lady to walk down them in heels and not once look at her feet. And, Lucy, carpets everywhere, and ceilings so tall it makes you giddy to look up at them. And the colors! White brocade on the sofa, red velvet drapes. Someday I’ll have to see up those stairs—all the

beds with silk canopies, I'll bet, silk curtains at the windows, and everywhere you look out the windows Menlo trees and Menlo fields. Even the sound and the sky must come to seem like part of Menlo."

Something in her voice, her eyes, must have disturbed me, for I found that suddenly I wanted to break whatever spell the place seemed to have cast on her. I wanted Menlo back. Not for myself. For Stark, to whom it belonged.

"There are lots of houses right in Royal Bay just as big as this one," I said stuffily, "some bigger and older. It's just that the Bartows can keep this one up. Anyhow, you should see Stark's room. Plain as can be. Just a fireplace and his guns and loads and loads of books all over everything."

"He's not a bit what I expected," Glory said pensively.

"What did you expect?"

"A young prince, of course. Dashing and merry. Instead he's cold and stuck-up. And as for any boy who recites poetry all over the place, well, I think it's downright sissy! The worst of it is"—she sighed and shrugged—"I'll have to make him like me if I ever want to come back." All at once her eyes widened. "What if I never get to come back, Lucy? Now that I know, what if I never find a way back? It'd be like having the gates of heaven shut in my face!"

She looked such a child now, so vulnerable, so helpless, I forgot that only a moment ago I'd felt frightened by the intensity of her longing. "Of course you'll come back," I said. "It may be awhile," I added honestly, thinking of how Stark didn't like Glory or she him, of how disappointing this meeting between my two beloveds had been, "but some day I'm sure you will. My mother says anything reasonable we wish for hard enough or long enough will happen."

"What if it isn't reasonable?" Glory said anxiously.

"Oh, fiddlesticks! You're as bad as Stark. Always doubting everything."

Just then Stark appeared, carrying a jelly glass filled with water. "This is the best I could do." Glory took the glass from him and tenderly put the orchid in it.

The closed study door at the end of the hall opened, and my father and Mr. Bartow came out. The afternoon was over. One of many for me, but for Glory a beginning and an end.

She was silent on the drive home. We dropped her off at the photography shop. Stiffly she thanked my father for “a very nice time.” To me she said, coming back to lean into the car window as though it were the most casual of afterthoughts, “From now on I wish you’d call me Gloria. It’s my real name, you know. Will you try to remember?”

Gloria? The name stuck in my throat. How relate such a name to the gay, dreaming hoyden I knew? To please her I tried but seldom succeeded. However, there eventually came a day when for the first time the name came easily to my lips, seeming altogether right and fitting. And forever after that day, even in my thoughts, the name was Gloria.

## CHAPTER 4

In the winter that followed Gloria's visit to Menlo, through no design of my own, I saw little of her, seldom visited the apartment over the photography shop. I was too busy. My mother, I believe now, saw to that. Though she herself had never seemed to care tuppence for what in Royal Bay passed for upper-echelon society, she suddenly decided it was important that I should. She put my name down for the Assembly two years hence. She enrolled me in Miss Hughes's dancing class, though I knew perfectly well how to dance. Hadn't Stark taught me the waltz a year ago? And Glory and I practiced it and the fox trot for hours in her father's studio? And as if that weren't enough, my mother got together with other mothers and imported a Frenchwoman to come twice a week from Charleston and converse with us in her native tongue.

I told Glory of these plans for me in Marty's ice-cream parlor where we'd stopped one afternoon on our way home from school. She had, I'd discovered, a habit of pretending not to listen when she didn't want to hear what you were saying. She did this now. Her gaze wandered. Absently she stirred her hot chocolate. When I'd finished she brought her gaze back to the table, rearranged the array of dime-store bracelets on her wrist, smiled at me distantly, and said, "I think I'll have another chocolate. This one's cold."

"Go right ahead. I've a whole 'nother quarter." Today was to be my treat.

"Oh, I can pay for it." She tossed her head. "Things are in the air at our house. Big things," she added mysteriously, and all at once began to laugh; clapping her hand over her mouth, she rocked with laughter. She laughed until the tears rolled out of her eyes. I couldn't imagine what she found to laugh at in the prospect of "big things in the air at home." Baffled and uncomfortable, I waited for her to subside enough to ask her.

"I'm not laughing at *that!*" she exclaimed in outrage. "I'm laughing at you. Well, not exactly you, maybe, but the whole silly business! All the folderol it takes to make a proper 'lady.' Dancing school! French lessons! The Assembly! And then what? Marriage to some nice little Royal Bay boy who's been put through the same wringer. Then one of those tidy little bungalows out on the bluff and later, if you're lucky, the family home on Bay Street! You can have it, Miss Lucy Fenwick. Some day, you'll see, I'll

be just as much the ‘lady’ as you. An improper lady, because I can’t bear the other kind, but a lady. All it really takes is money and a haughty air.”

Stung by her scorn, I said, “It isn’t anything I *want* to do. Besides, it hasn’t anything to do with being a ‘lady’ or anything else, much less getting married to ‘some little Royal Bay boy.’” However, even as I denied this I realized dimly that probably from my mother’s point of view as well as Glory’s this was exactly what it had to do with. Vehemently I recoiled from the idea. “If I ever marry anyone, it won’t be for ages, and then it’ll be Stark Bartow.” Never before had I thought of Stark as anything but friend. I didn’t now. Still I spoke the truth. In forcing me to look into the future, Glory had forced me into an admission I’d not even made to myself until that moment.

“Stark Bartow?” Glory said incredulously. “I didn’t know you and he were any more than friends.”

“We aren’t,” I said and flushed, “but that doesn’t mean we won’t get married some day, does it? I can’t possibly imagine marrying anyone else.”

“So that’s all it is!” Glory sounded relieved. “For a minute I thought you and he had a real crush on.”

“You mean like Susan Willett and Tommy Smythe?” I giggled. The idea of Stark traipsing around with big moon eyes after any girl was incongruous. “I should hope not!” I added.

“You’d better not always hope not,” Glory said. “It takes more than being friends to make a man want you.”

I knew what she meant. I hadn’t read the Brontë sisters, waded through Hawthorne and Walpole for nothing. And of late I had had my own vaguely disturbing thoughts on the subject. Nebulous longings. Unaccountable thirsts. Hungers seeming to have their origin in the heart rather than the mind. Moonlight making a certain pattern against the tree outside my window, rain with a wind behind it, a book, a movie might evoke this unrest. Undirected. Nameless. Suspect.

But what had these unchanneled yearnings to do with the childish goings on of Susan and Tommy? Or for that matter with the close, easy camaraderie I received from Stark? Were they the first stirrings of love? But no vision presented itself. Unless perhaps that of some movie idol and his current leading lady.

To Glory I said, “Do you ever think about who you’ll marry?”

“I used to,” Glory said pensively and, plying the tablecloth with the handle of her spoon, drew a heart. “I used to think about it a lot. Someone wild and handsome and daring. Someone who wasn’t afraid of anyone or anything.” She tossed her head, swinging the black hair. “But now I’ve something else to think about,” she said, the sudden glow in her eyes burning away the moment’s sadness, “something real, something beautiful. And you can’t have everything, can you?”

“Is it what you were talking about when you said something was happening at home, something big?”

“Heavens, no!”

“Then what?”

“I can’t tell you. I can’t ever tell anyone. Told wishes never come true.” She pushed back her empty chocolate cup and slid out of the booth. “Anyway, you’d think I was crazy.”

I know now of what she dreamed, and she was right not to tell me.

We parted a few blocks from my house. I realized then she’d still not told me what the “big” news was with the McGills. I couldn’t imagine what it might be. I’d gathered the photography shop was far from thriving. My father said it was because Mr. McGill spent too much time painting and not enough time in the front of the shop. It occurred to me that the “big things” were nonexistent, a hurried means of dealing with a too painful envy.

That night I asked my mother if she couldn’t get Glory into Miss Hughes’s dancing class. She didn’t even look up from the book she was reading.

“Darling,” she said, “even if I could get Miss Hughes’s consent, which is doubtful as she doesn’t know Glory, Glory’s parents couldn’t afford it. It would only embarrass them to ask.”

“Then I shan’t go either,” I cried furiously. “It isn’t fair!” I seldom flouted my parents. My mother put down her book. My father, who’d been buried at the far end of the room in a brief, peered at me questioningly over the tops of his glasses.

“Just what isn’t fair?” he queried.

“That Glory can’t go where I go, do the things I do. First thing you know we won’t even be friends any more.” To my astonishment, if not theirs, I burst into tears and fled the room. I didn’t turn on the light in my room; the moonlight sufficed. I went and sat in the window and looked out on the

silvered bay and let my tears fall where they would. In my heart I knew it was not really for Glory I wept or for life's painful inequities. I wept for those faraway afternoons in the apartment on Palm Street when Glory and I shared the paper-doll castle with our counts and countesses and afterward sat down for tea, ringed by the warmth of Mrs. McGill's fleeting, anxious smile and Mr. McGill's ardent commentaries on "the world of art." Somehow I felt it all slipping away from me, and there was no way to stop it and nothing to take its place.

Miss Hughes was a tiny, exuberant little woman with graying hair and a whiplash tongue. An incorrigible snob, she'd found in instructing Royal Bay's young in ballroom dancing and "manners befitting good breeding" the one means by which she could earn the wherewithal to keep the old Hughes home intact without losing an ounce of her native arrogance. Her classes were held every Friday afternoon in the basement of the great ugly yellow house which had been built by her great-grandfather. They were conducted as nearly as possible like miniature, rigidly organized balls. The girls all wore white organdy dresses of a length now described as ballerina but in those days known to us only as "Miss Hughes's calf-length." We thought it her own invention. And at that time it was. Long white stockings and patent-leather pumps completed the uniform. The boys wore blue serge suits and the male equivalent of our patent leathers. For an hour and a half we danced to an out-of-tune piano (Miss Hughes had a great sense of rhythm and no ear for music) played by her niece. There being a more or less equal number of boys and girls, most of the cutting in was done by Miss Hughes herself. She would stand on the side lines, searching out with her lorgnette whichever of us seemed most in need of instruction. How we dreaded to see her, her choice finally made, come swooping across the floor toward us.

In spite of the tedious conformity—"Carl, how often must I tell you that you owe your partner more than a fixed smile? Talk, boy, talk!" . . . "Tommy, the gentleman's hand rests lightly, lightly, like this, ever so lightly on his partner's shoulder." . . . "Lucy, when you leave one partner for another, do it graciously, a look of regret for the one, a smile for the other." . . . "Miriam, flirting has no place on a dance floor . . . not until you're old enough to know where it leads"—in spite of the petty humiliations, I look back on those Fridays with nostalgia. Even now when I hear "The Blue Danube" played on some especially tinny piano I can smell the eau de violet Miss Hughes saturated her handkerchiefs with, can feel the hot, moist pressure of Carl or Tommy or Robert's hand nervously guiding me through the one-two-three of the waltz. Can see Flagg, his first day there, like some roped steer, cornered, mute, glaring from the side lines. The promise of an

outboard motor from his father was what had got him there. Laurie Peters, whose mother was cousin to the Flaggs, told us that much. Why Miss Hughes had consented to take him on was a matter of speculation. Some said the colonel paid her double for her pains. My mother was probably more nearly correct. She said, "After all, his mother was a Flagg." I must say he added color. Not that he ever danced with me. He told me later it was because he was afraid to. He danced with everyone else. Beautifully. Breaking all Miss Hughes's rules of decorum, he held his partners as he pleased, distantly for the waltz, breathlessly close for the fox trot. We waited for the explosion, but Miss Hughes, watching him, seemed oblivious of anything except the passionate grace with which he lent himself to the tune. Susan, Miriam, Laurie, all of them pretended to be terrified of him, but I noticed they went out of their way to be near him when partners were being chosen. I too longed to dance with him but was too proud to let him guess or thought I was. He said later that he did guess it, but it only made him more afraid. He said, "I had a special feeling about you that I didn't want to spoil by being too young or holding you too close. I thought about you a lot. I started thinking about you the day I got washed up at Menlo. It was different from the way I thought about other girls—whether or not their breasts were really as round and soft as they looked, whether or not they'd get mad if I kissed them. I thought about your smile, quick and shy, and your eyes. I knew some day there'd be a woman's heart looking out of those eyes. I wanted to wait for that. And I didn't want to make any mistakes in the meantime."

I'm glad he felt that way. Much as I wanted to dance with him, the way any girl wants to dance with a proficient partner, I'd have been troubled and confused by any further attention from him. Already there was a man's sureness to the set of his shoulders, and when he looked at a girl his eyes never wavered. At fifteen I was still in many ways a child, receiving whatever adult emotions I entertained from books. Content to absorb, to watch, to wait. The bystander. It took Glory, or rather Mr. McGill, to end this detachment.

## CHAPTER 5

I've never known if Mr. McGill's decision to seek a market for his paintings in New York was born of hope or despair. My parents, the town, in fact, took it for granted that, unable to support his wife and daughter adequately, he'd simply walked out on them. I'm more inclined to believe it was the way Glory said it was. She slipped me a note at school one day asking me to meet her in the cloakroom at recess because she had something "terribly exciting" to tell me.

The cloakroom, a large, airless closet where we hung our coats, was, because of its unattractiveness, the one place you could be sure of a relative amount of privacy. Glory, bursting with her news, could hardly wait for the door to close behind us.

"He's done it! Pop's gone to New York to make his fortune." She clapped her hands together and sank down on the bench used for putting on or taking off galoshes. "He left this morning." She looked up at me triumphantly.

"To New York?" In my preoccupation of late with my own pursuits I'd forgotten the dreams and aspirations that had for so long nourished my friend. "Whatever is he going to do in New York?"

"Sell his paintings, of course, silly. Exhibit them, sell them, become famous! Pop's always said that if you wanted recognition you had to go looking for it. Recognition isn't ever going to come to Royal Bay, you can bet your sweet life!" She spoke of "recognition" as though it were some lordly presence with whom her father had made an appointment. Her eyes shone with confidence.

"Then you'll be going away? To New York?"

"Not until he gets established. Sends for us. But then, Lucy, just *think!* It'll be the best dramatic school in New York for me! A real studio for Pop, and all the time in the world to paint. And for Mom brocades and satins! Laces!"

"It sounds wonderful," I said dazedly. The transition had been too rapid for me. Naïve and trusting though I might be, I couldn't help wondering if it hadn't perhaps been too rapid for Mr. McGill as well.

I said, "What's going to become of the shop while he's gone?"

"Oh, *that*." Glory gave a deprecatory shrug. "Mom and I'll have to keep it going for a while. Anybody can snap a picture, and we've got a Mr. Green to come in nights and do the developing."

"And you're not scared?" Nothing I'd ever heard or read about fame led me to believe it came overnight.

"Really, Lucy!" Glory said crossly. "You don't seem to realize what this *means*. But you will, oh, you will . . ." Her eyes got a misted, faraway look, and her voice dropped as though she'd forgotten I was listening and was talking only to herself. "Mr. McGill, the artist, they'll say, and that's his daughter . . . heads turning to look, and I'll hold my head high as high and pretend not to hear them. When I come back to Royal Bay, I'll stay at the inn and be proud and mighty with everyone."

"It's all so sudden," I murmured.

"I know," Glory agreed happily. "Pop made up his mind just like that!" She snapped her fingers decisively. "That's the kind of man he is. He came to the breakfast table about a week ago looking like the cat that had swallowed the canary. 'Girls,' he said, 'the time has come! I've got a basement full of masterpieces and a jug full of coins hidden in the pantry, and I'm on my way.' Oh, he looked pleased with himself. And so young and handsome, Lucy, you'd not have known him. Mom brought out the muscatel even though it was just morning, and we all drank a toast."

"I wish I could have been there," I said, the magic of their hope beginning to take hold of me again. Had I been there I am sure I'd have been as certain as Glory that her father was going to New York to take the art world by storm and that the failing photography shop on Palm Street had been but a front for the important work going on behind it.

As it was, I was half convinced. Enough to be shocked and outraged by the interpretation my parents put on it. "He wouldn't leave them," I declared. "He loves them too much. And them him." Was it not love as well as hope that had given the place its charm, its warmth? Surely since Mr. McGill had been gone it had been hardly the same place at all. The back room stripped of the hundreds of canvases that had lined the walls, the overhead light no longer burning the shadows away, was a grim spot indeed. Glory and her mother seemed different too. Like the room below, stripped of some essential light and color. Yet the photography shop, under Mrs. McGill's management and with the help of Mr. Green, was beginning, for the first time in its history, to prosper. And the news from Mr. McGill,

though as yet tentative, was always cheerful. Glory read me scraps from his letters. "I talked to a dealer yesterday who is most enthusiastic; at present they're overstocked, but after Christmas . . ."

Christmas! For a while I forgot all about Glory. Stark came home from college, bringing two classmates with him. Mrs. Bartow emerged from her semi-seclusion to entertain them. It is one of the happiest memories I have of her. In her effort to make the visit a gay one she became almost gay herself, certainly younger than I'd ever remembered her. Her fine, deep-set eyes sparkled softly, and her thin, delicate mouth more often than not curved in a smile. She called me daily to consult about plans for the evening to come, as though by some unspoken, tacit agreement we had become conspirators contriving toward her son's pleasure. Almost every night Miriam, Susan, or sometimes Laurie, and I went to Menlo for cards, an oyster roast at the point, or charades acted out in the drawing room where the velvet curtains that closed it off from the library made an excellent stage. One of the visitors, a redheaded boy from Boston, took a fancy to me. At first Stark hardly seemed to notice. When he did finally notice, he seemed more amused than dismayed. Piqued, I encouraged the redhead out of all proportion to my own involvement, allowing him even to kiss me behind the velvet curtain one night as we plotted how to present a charade with the name Stark Bartow.

The kiss, my first, was disappointing. Hadn't my mother always said kissing was for those intensely attracted to each other? But if I were to wait for Stark, it would seem it was to be a long wait. His friends said he never asked girls for college weekends though they knew of more than one who'd angled futilely for an invitation. They teased him about it. They said his love was Menlo. He never denied it. His father still dreamed of having his son take his place as head of the Bartow mining operations, but I knew that secretly Stark was taking courses in agriculture and animal husbandry. He'd confided to me that he planned to raise the best cattle east of Texas right here at Menlo.

Christmas Eve the Bartows had a dance in honor of their son's eighteenth birthday. It was my first real dance, my first real evening dress—white chiffon spangled with tiny silver stars. I was determined that Stark should notice me. Really notice me.

My father drove us out, Miriam, Susan, Laurie, and me, and left us at the door. Suddenly I was frightened, standing there with the door swinging open on all those strange faces, the smell of pine boughs and perfume and the loud authoritative music of the orchestra imported from Savannah. Nothing

seemed the way I remembered it. Not even Stark, standing in the receiving line with his parents, stiff and formal in his evening clothes, with hardly a smile for me when he took my hand.

When we went upstairs to leave our wraps, I fought a hysterical impulse to flee down the back stairs and away. But I found I wasn't alone in my stage fright. In front of the mirror arranging her dress, Miriam moaned, "Supposing no one dances with me! All those strange boys and girls from Charleston and Savannah looking so horribly sophisticated!" To my great relief the redhead waited for me at the foot of the stairs. The receiving line had broken up, and I didn't see Stark anywhere. Nor did he cut in on me for ages. When he finally did I could see he was in a dreadful mood. He isn't the world's best dancer, but that night he didn't even try. Once around the floor and he said:

"Let's get out of here. Meet me in the study, will you? If we go out together, there'll be no end of silly talk."

In the study he got right to the point. "What's come over you," he said, "letting yourself be kissed by every Tom, Dick, and Harry that comes along?"

We'd had our disagreements—did Byron, Keats, and Shelley write with anything like the vigor and soul of his adored Walt Whitman, and how could anyone but a woman even compare the Brontë sisters with Thomas Hardy? We'd had our quarrels, too, but I'd never seen him truly angry with me before. I was totally unprepared. The injustice of his accusation stunned me further. I could only stare at him in paralyzed silence.

"You don't deny, do you, that you kissed Roger behind the curtain the other night?"

"Of course I don't deny it," I said, in possession of my tongue again. A flounce of my head further added that I considered this no affair of his. Inwardly I cursed Roger for his prattling.

"Hasn't anyone told you you're too young for that sort of thing?"

"No."

"Well, I'm telling you now. You are. Besides, Roger is a rake with women. He boasted about kissing you!"

"There wasn't much to boast about," I said. "It didn't mean anything."

"It didn't mean anything!" He sounded outraged.

“Not a thing.”

“Then that makes it far worse.” He’d been facing me, his hands behind him braced against the Governor Winthrop desk for support. Now he turned and strode to the window, his back to me. Over his shoulder he said, “I thought at least I could blame some silly girlish infatuation. But no! You won’t even give me that satisfaction!”

“Really, Stark, I don’t see what right—”

“You don’t?” He whirled about to face me again. “Well, that *proves* what a child you are! Just because I don’t make calf’s eyes and pretty phrases . . .” As he spoke he dug his hand in his pocket, drew out a small velvet-covered box. “I was going to give you this for Christmas,” he said crossly. “Now I feel like a damned fool!” Even so he held the box out to me, and I took it. Opened it. Inside was a tiny amethyst brooch, set in yellow gold.

“Oh, Stark,” I breathed. “How lovely, how perfectly lovely.”

“It was my grandmother’s,” he said stiffly. “I told Mother I wanted to give it to you. She was very pleased. You’ve always been a favorite of hers.”

“You make me ashamed,” I whispered, chastened at last.

“Here, let me pin it on.” He pinned it to the white strap of my dress and stood back to admire his handiwork. “You are getting really quite pretty, you know,” he said, and added soberly, “To be quite honest with you, Lucy, I’ve not the slightest idea yet what it’s like to be in love. Have you?”

“Not really, I suppose.” Tremulously I fingered the brooch at my shoulder.

“I hope, though, that when I do fall in love it will be with you.”

“I hope so too,” I said.

A strange conversation! A strange boy. But I floated through the rest of the evening on a cloud.

My mother was waiting up for me when I got home. There was nothing unusual about this. What was unusual was that, though it was after midnight, she was still fully dressed, and she had such an anxious weariness about her that I thought I must have misjudged the time, that it must be far later than I’d thought. I waited for her to remonstrate with me, but instead she suddenly smiled. “You must have had a wonderful time. It shines in your eyes.”

“Am I that obvious?” I touched the pin at my shoulder. “Look, Mummy! Do you wonder that I feel glowish? Stark gave it to me. For Christmas. Isn’t it lovely?”

My mother, bending to examine it closer, said, “And old, too. It must be a family piece. Do you think you should have accepted it?”

“Of course. He wanted me to have it. Besides, he’ll probably want to marry me some day, and then it’ll be back in the family again, if that’s what’s worrying you.” Both hands clasped, I executed an abandoned pirouette. “My first grown-up present! And do you know what? I’m starved. I was much too excited to eat at the dance.” I started for the kitchen.

“I think I could use a little sustenance too.” My mother followed me. “It has been a rather harrowing evening.” In the brighter light of the kitchen I noticed again how tired she looked.

“Harrowing?” I broke eggs into a bowl and stirred them.

“I wasn’t going to tell you until morning,” she said, “but perhaps this is a better time. It’s about Glory.”

Waves of guilt washed over me. Not one thought of Glory in all these enchanted weeks . . . and all the while . . . I sank down in the chair beside the kitchen table. “Has something happened to her?”

“No, not to Glory,” my mother said quickly. She took the bowl of eggs I’d abandoned over to the stove. “Glory’s fine. I’ve just come from there. It’s her father.”

“Mr. McGill?”

“You know he wasn’t successful at selling his paintings.” My mother seemed to ignore the question in my voice, but in reality I suppose she was giving me time to prepare myself. “Mrs. McGill and Glory hadn’t heard from him for weeks. They were worried. Mr. Green, the gentleman who helps them with the shop, called tonight. He asked for you. When I said you weren’t here, he asked if I would come. He said we were the only friends they had as far as he knew. He said Mr. McGill had died, and he thought it a shame they shouldn’t have a friend with them to comfort them. So I went,” my mother finished, her eyes avoiding mine.

“But he couldn’t just die. He was so alive. He never had a sick day in his life. He couldn’t just die.” I looked at my mother beseechingly. I wanted a denial. Reassurance that I’d not heard correctly. She thought I wanted the truth.

“No, he didn’t just die,” she said, coming to put a tentatively comforting hand on my shoulder. “I might as well tell you—you’re bound to hear sooner or later. He jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge. It took them a day or two to find out who he was and notify his family.”

“He jumped? On purpose?”

“It would seem so.”

“Then he must have wanted to die.” I found a modicum of comfort in this. A man, especially a man of Mr. McGill’s convictions, should have some hand in so tragic a destiny. “Does Glory know? That he did it on purpose, I mean?” At the thought of Glory all comfort vanished. Her adored father gone. Forever gone, and with him all the dreams, the impossible dreams that for Glory were the only reality.

“Yes, she knows,” my mother was saying as I brushed back the moisture gathering in my eyes. “The McGills have no telephone, you know. The message came by Western Union from the New York Police Department. Glory received it. She is taking it very well. It’s almost as though she’d expected it.”

“She didn’t expect it,” I said. “Glory never expects anything but happy endings. He shouldn’t have done it to her!” I exclaimed, feeling suddenly Glory’s pain, feeling, too, the thing worse for Glory to bear than pain even, the shame. “He shouldn’t have done it,” I repeated, glad to replace confusion and hurt with anger.

“That isn’t for us to decide. Nor even for Glory and Mrs. McGill,” my mother said piously. “We all do what we have to do. He may have felt he was no longer of use to them.”

## CHAPTER 6

The next day, Christmas Day, I went in the afternoon to pay my respects at the apartment on Palm Street, but no one answered my ring. The shop, of course, was locked, but I knew that the bell which rang there also rang upstairs. I crossed the street and looked up at the windows of the McGill's apartment, hoping that if anyone were there they would see me and let me in. In the center window a tiny Christmas tree bloomed with lights, and for a moment I thought I saw a curtain move and behind it a shadowy form, but I couldn't be sure. I went back the next day. Though the shop was still closed, I could see Mr. Green at work inside. I tapped on the glass of the door and he let me in.

"They said they didn't want to see anyone," he said uncertainly. "But that doesn't seem right. You just go on up and knock."

The stairs were dark. I had only memory and a small crack of daylight under the door at the top to guide me. I knocked and waited, and presently Glory's voice from the other side of the door queried, "Who is it?"

"It's me. Lucy."

Silence. I could feel her indecision as though it were a palpable entity. I was on the point of turning and groping my way back down the unfriendly stairs when abruptly the door opened and Glory stood back to let me in. She was wearing a black dress that I'd last seen on her mother. It was too short for her and too tight. Her heavy black hair was drawn back in a tight knot pinned to the back of her head. Still she was beautiful. I was to learn that nothing she ever did to herself could dim those large, lustrous eyes or the high, tawny color of skin and cheek, nothing that ever happened to her was to change the soft, sensuous line of mouth and chin. Austerity of dress merely accentuated these things; grief enhanced them.

"I didn't mean to intrude," I said. "I can come back another time."

"What's the difference? It'll be the same later. Come in." Making up for her ungraciousness, she reached for my hand, drew me into the room.

The door opened directly into the tiny, overfurnished parlor, and for a moment I was afraid that I was expected to sit on one of the upright chairs and make the sort of funereal conversation I'd heard my mother make on

such occasions. But after only a brief hesitation, as if she, too, were turning over the fitness of things, Glory suddenly shrugged.

“Come on back to the kitchen. It’s a mess, and Mother’s not herself at all, but she can’t help it. She’ll be better after the funeral, I think. It takes awhile to believe some things, and who’s to blame her for smoothing the way a little?” The last was spoken just outside the closed kitchen door in a voice that was both pleading and defiant. As she flung open the door, she fixed a smile on her lips. “Mother,” she called as though her mother were in some further room instead of right there at the kitchen table, looking up at us with startled red-rimmed eyes that seemed to have difficulty in focusing. “Here’s Lucy, come to see us. Lucy Fenwick.”

“Lucy Fenwick. Well, now, that’s nice. Lucy. ‘The lass with the delicate air,’ Mr. McGill used to always be saying. Potrey, you know. He was always reciting potrey.”

“Poetry, Mother,” Glory said with some of her old annoyance. “The word has three syllables.”

“What use is syllables to me now, child? Sit down, Lucy, and I’ll fix a pot of tea.” She started waveringly to her feet, collapsed with a small, defeated sigh. “Nothing’s worth the effort,” she said, and without further explanation poured something that looked like whisky from a bottle tabled “Ammonia” into a glass and drank it.

I sat down uneasily opposite her while Glory busied herself with making tea. Surely there was something I should be saying to let them know how sorry I was about everything, how acutely I felt for them, but there seemed no opening here for ordinary sympathy.

“We’re going to Georgia for the burial,” Mrs. McGill said conversationally. “Mr. McGill said they’d never get him back there except in a pine box. And that’s how he’s goin’, God love him.”

“Please, Ma,” Glory said, “you know you shouldn’t talk so much when you’re not yourself. Lucy’ll think we have no respect.”

“What good is respect to me now?” Mrs. McGill said and looked at me questioningly, two large tears forming in each eye and rolling down her pale, tired cheeks. “I sent him money to come home. Train fare and over. I sent it over a week ago and got his signed receipt back. Why do you think he didn’t come back, Lucy?”

In an agony of discomfort I shook my head. “I don’t know,” I murmured.

“Train fare and over. And a letter begging him to come home where he belonged.”

“Stop it!” Glory whirled about from the stove, her voice shrill with reproach. “He did what he had to do. Just the way he always did. How could he come back? A man like him can’t go back; he has to go forward. He was true to himself to the end. Brave and true,” Glory cried, and suddenly, desperately, clutched a towel to her face to hide its weeping. I went and tried to put my arms around her, but she pushed me away and, removing the towel, went to the sink and dabbed at her eyes with cold water.

“Someone’s knocking,” Mrs. McGill said. “Someone’s knocking outside the parlor door.”

“I’ll go,” I said, grateful to be of some use.

“Whoever it is. I’ll see them in the parlor,” Glory said. “Don’t bring them back here.”

It was a man from the express office with a large package addressed to Mrs. Thomas McGill and Miss Glory McGill. It was postmarked New York City. I took the package into the kitchen and put it down on the table in front of Mrs. McGill. She peered mistily, distrustfully, at the address.

“It’s Pop’s handwriting,” Glory, leaning over her mother’s shoulder, said in a small, awed voice. “It’s *his* writing, Mom!”

“It can’t be,” Mrs. McGill said. “He’s dead, isn’t he? Nobody would fool us about a thing like that, would they, Glory?”

“Of course not, Mom. But it is from Pop. Mailed a week ago. Don’t you see? Mailed before . . . Our Christmas present, don’t you suppose?” As she spoke, she tore excitedly at the outer wrapping. “I knew he hadn’t forgot us! I knew it! Oh, Mom, look!”

The package held two boxes, and as Glory removed the top of one of them, ribbons, laces, bows toppled out. Beneath them were layers of material. “Ah, but look!” Glory lifted out a bolt of pink brocade artfully embossed with flowers, then a roll of purple velvet, and after it folds of pure silk, ivory in color and as light and delicate as a moth’s wings. “And see, here is a card!” she exclaimed. “It says, ‘To my queen.’ That’s you, Mom. He always said that someday . . . he always promised . . .”

Mrs. McGill snatched the note out of Glory’s hand. She held it close to her eyes. ‘To my queen,’ she murmured in a breathless, flutelike voice. She dropped the slip of paper and, clasping the silk between the fingers of one

hand, held it up and stroked it with the other. “Perfect, perfect . . .” she breathed. “And velvet, too, fit for a king’s robe, and brocade, real brocade, Glory. The first I ever touched.”

“This must be for me,” Glory said, opening the other box. “‘To my princess,’ it says. Oh, oh, did you ever see anything so grand?”

Out of the box she drew a silver tiara, set with rhinestones and seed pearls. She ran to the mirror over the kitchen sink and set it on her head and turned, her eyes alight, to show us how perfectly it suited her.

“Beautiful!” Mrs. McGill clapped her hands. “If only he could see you!” Suddenly her hands fell to her lap, her mouth drooped forlornly. “Whoever will you wear it for if not for him?”

“But I will wear it for him!” Glory’s eyes shone. “For him and for me and for all the things we dreamed about. Some day when I’ve made them come true I’ll give a ball. I’ll ask everyone in Royal Bay to come. I’ll stand in front of that huge mirror in the hall. No. No, the stairs are better. I’ll come down those stairs so high and wide and polished. I’ll stop a moment at the landing with the high window behind me and give them all a chance to see the new mistress of—” Suddenly Glory looked at me and clapped a hand to her mouth. “I almost gave my wish away. I almost told. You didn’t guess, did you, Lucy? Because if you guessed, it might not come true. Told wishes never do.”

She looked so upset, what could I do but shake my head? Yet where besides Menlo could Glory have seen such a mirror in the hall? Stairs so wide and polished? A high window at their landing?

“When that day comes,” Mrs. McGill mused tipsily, taking up the fairy tale, “I’ll dress you in this brocade. Or maybe the velvet.”

“Yes, the velvet, Mom. The brocade will be for you.”

It seemed a good time to leave them, the ghost of Mr. McGill and his womenfolk to whom he had, even in death, given a moment’s reason to hope, to dream, again.

Such was their enchantment with his gift that they apparently never drew any painful conclusions about the unused fare home.

They went to Georgia for the funeral and stayed. Glory’s letters, the only ones I’ve ever received from her, were frequent and forlorn.

“We are staying with Mom’s sister Rose. Rose’s husband travels. They have five kids. When he travels I get to sleep with Aunt Rose. When he’s

home I sleep on an army cot in the hall. Mom and Aunt Rose sit around all day talking about when they were girls. Maybe when they get talked out we can come home. I didn't know I could miss a place so bad. I dream about it nights . . .”

“God help me! Mom has taken a sewing job in one of the department stores here and moved us into a boarding-house. She says as long as Mr. Green keeps on running the shop for us in Royal Bay, what's the use going back? I tell her my whole future life depends on it. Me and my dreams, she says! Without Pop to remind her what there is to be got out of life she's satisfied to be nothing and nobody. This town gives me the creeps. Please write me all the news. Does the mighty Master Bartow still write to you?”

“At night I shut my eyes and see the water of Royal Bay and smell the salt smell all mixed with flowers. Sometimes with my eyes shut I almost think I'm sitting at Marty's or on the sea wall in front of your house. Thanks for your letter. I laughed till I split my sides over what you wrote about that wild Flagg Thorpe being practically lassoed and tied onto the train and sent away to a fancy school. He won't last there long unless they put him in a room with bars on it. You didn't say anything about one high and mighty master of Menlo in your last letter. Does that mean you aren't hearing?”

“I begged Mom again last night to let us go back home. She said she was afraid if she went back she'd miss Pop too much. She said that was all Royal Bay meant to her. I told her she was killing me staying here.”

After that the letters stopped for months, and then one May morning toward the end of school Glory walked into class. She was wearing heels and her hair in a coil about her head, and all around I heard the girls whispering to each other, asking who she was. I felt the breathless silence of the boys as they watched her walk to the teacher's desk. Proud shoulders and long legs that carried her along with a rhythm of their own.

It seems to me that it was then that Glory began to change. Before she'd always looked on school as a means to an end. “Pop says these days a girl's got to get an education if she wants to make an impression.” But after “Pop's” death school became an end in itself. She tackled each subject as though it were a war to be won regardless of the sacrifice involved. She was touchingly eager to know what books I read and spent many hours curled on the couch in our living room, frowning over my favorite poets or listlessly turning the pages of Galsworthy, Hawthorne, and my latest enthusiasm, Mr. Somerset Maugham.

Now that the apartment over the photography shop had lost its meaning for her, she spent more and more time at our house. She never seemed really comfortable there, and often I had the uneasy feeling that she came only to observe. She hardly spoke a word in my father's presence. With my mother she was mannered and shy. She asked me a hundred questions about things that had never interested her before. What did the "R.S.V.P." mean she'd seen on one of my invitations? When you were introduced to someone, what was the correct thing to say? If you wanted to set a table for a four-course meal, how did you arrange the cutlery? I didn't know, but soon after that, when my mother was expecting guests for dinner and Emma had set the table early, I found Glory in the dining room studying the outlay with the same determined absorption she gave to her lessons. Startled to find me watching her, she tossed her head with some of her old arrogance and said:

"It's very simple, really. You start from the outside with forks and spoons. I can't imagine why you didn't know."

She no longer talked about becoming an actress. She seemed absorbed in schoolwork and strangely, in a detached and clinical sort of way, in me. Before it had always been I who'd watched and listened, charmed by her high spirits, led on by her vivid imagination. Now she seemed almost deliberately to have deferred the center of the stage to me. What I wore, where I went, what I did was of the greatest interest to her. My life at that point was not so full as to excite envy, nor did she seem to feel any. Only curiosity. Did I still think some day I'd marry that "stuck-up" Bartow boy? Had I ever kissed him? Had I ever kissed any boy? When I tried to draw her out on how she felt about love and marriage—a favorite subject among the girls at Miss Hughes's dancing class—she'd shrug and say she didn't know, that she had other things to think about. Though we were seeing more of each other than we had in a long while, I felt she was becoming more and more a stranger to me. The confidences she pried out of me were never returned. Sometimes, catching her eyes on me, speculative and cool, I'd have the uneasy feeling that I, like the dining-room table, was being studied for some future purpose.

Perhaps if we'd found some adequate substitute for the paper dolls, for the long afternoons around the kitchen table on Palm Street, for the sodas at Marty's, we might have kept our friendship intact. Or, finding no substitute, had she still been able to share with me her hopes and far-flung dreams . . . but how could she? Even then, I'm sure, hopes and dreams had hardened to obsession and I, its greatest threat.

I went to boarding school that next winter. The school was not far away, and I got home for one or two weekends a semester, but I naturally chose weekends when something special was happening at home—a dance, a party, or some family anniversary. It was only after I returned to school that I'd remember Glory and feel badly that I'd made no effort to see her. It was then that I'd write to her, short little letters making light fun of the school and the girls, though actually I adored both. Glory never answered any of them, and just before school let out for the summer my mother wrote that Mrs. McGill and Mr. Green had run away together, leaving not only Glory behind but Mr. Green's wife and three small children.

“Our church auxiliary,” my mother wrote, “is doing what it can for Mrs. Green, but as the McGills are not members of our church, I couldn't interest them in Glory's dilemma. Your father and I gave her a little money to tide her over until something could be decided. Next we knew, without a by-your-leave, she'd taken a bus to New York. Poor child, I hope she has relatives there or someone who will look after her. . . .” I shed a few tears over that letter but not many, because I knew in my heart that I would not really miss her. And despised myself for knowing it.

I assumed Glory had gone to New York to pursue her childhood dream of becoming an actress. I still think that is probably what she had in mind at the time. And I think it must have been Mr. Bartow's stroke that decided her on another and, for her, most unsuitable career. Though how she ever learned of it I'll never know. Unless perhaps even then she'd established some sort of understanding with the gardener of Menlo and he had kept her informed of all that happened there.

## CHAPTER 7

Flagg's alarm clock woke me that morning after Gloria's return to Menlo, so I must have slept a little between sunup and seven. I waited for Flagg to turn the clock off. When he didn't, I opened my eyes. I saw that his bed was empty and that his clothes were gone from the chair where he'd flung them the night before.

I had waked to the memory of his love-making, but at the sight of the empty bed, the barren chair, that memory was displaced by another one. Gloria had returned to Menlo! I shivered and pulled the sheet up to my chin though I could see the hot August sun bearing down on a still and brassy bay. I knew it wasn't honor but fear that had held Gloria to her promise for so long. What gave her the courage to break it now? She'd never return without a key to triumph clutched in her hands. Not for her the beggar's way, pleading clemency, that I knew. "'The sky is falling,' cried Chicken Little . . ."

The bedroom door opened a crack. For one childishly abandoned moment I let myself believe it was Flagg come to tell me I had nothing to fear, nothing to regret.

It was Flagg. He was wearing the blue jeans he wore when he expected to take one of the boats out himself. In the old days this had often been necessary. Now when he went, which was seldom, the demands on him at the plant being what they were, it was for pleasure or, and I felt sure this was the case today, escape. He didn't come into the room but stood uneasily in the doorway, as if the room had become overnight more mine than his. "I'm sorry I forgot the alarm," he said. "It's too bad you couldn't have slept awhile."

"Have you had breakfast?"

"All that I want. I won't be home for lunch."

"Then I must fix you something to take with you." The plant, as we referred to the docks, packing sheds, and small office building where the shrimp were brought in to be frozen and shipped, was out at Eaton's Landing. There was a coffee urn and a coke machine, but that was all.

“I picked up a couple of oranges and a chocolate bar. I won’t want more than that.”

He never could eat when he was upset. I said, “Any news of the storm?”

“She’s going toward Florida and the Gulf of Mexico. We don’t need to worry about her.”

“That’s good.” My voice must have betrayed my total disinterest, for he said:

“You think I exaggerate? A hurricane hitting us broadside could wipe out the whole shebang at Eaton’s Landing.”

“I know,” I said, and suddenly, in spite of all that I could do to hold them back, tears gushed from my eyes. “How can you pretend?” I cried. “How can you pretend that nothing has happened? That nothing has changed?” I wiped my eyes dry with the sheet edge and looked at him.

“Just what has changed, Lucy?” His eyes met mine square on, and beneath them his mouth set in a hard, thin line. The man’s mouth. Withholding a man’s thoughts. Withholding a man’s pain. But I was a woman, and I had nothing to withhold.

“You’ve changed. Overnight you’ve changed,” I said. “Can you deny that you still love her?”

For a moment he hesitated. “Have I ever tried to?” His voice was gentle, low, as though he wished to spare me if I’d only let him. But I wouldn’t let him.

“You loved me yesterday. Last night.” My voice broke on a sob.

“I still do,” he said, but he made no move toward me.

“How can you love us both?”

“Don’t you think I’d give my soul not to?” His voice was no longer gentle. “Do you think it’s anything I want? Or ever wanted? Do we have to go over it all again?”

“Why did she come back, Flagg? Why?”

“You must have known she would,” he said. “Menlo means more to her than life. I never understood why she left in the first place.”

“I told you why. I asked her to. For your sake, for hers, for mine.”

“I never understood why she agreed to it. It wasn’t like her.”

“I’m so frightened,” I exclaimed.

“Of what?” he said levelly, killing any impulse I might have had to tell him. “That I’ll leave you and the children? I haven’t. I didn’t. That I’ll betray you? I know you felt betrayed, but in my heart you never have been. Betrayal is to abandon one love for another.”

“But you have deceived me!”

“I didn’t want to hurt you.”

“And now?”

“I didn’t know she was coming back, if that’s what you mean. I haven’t heard from her in all these years or she from me.”

“Then her going changed nothing?”

“At first it did. I thought she’d wanted to go. After you told me you’d asked her to go, I understood.”

“And loved her all the more for it,” I moaned. “I can’t share you, Flagg. I’ll only lose you if I try to. If I try to part of me will die, and I’ll lose you because of its dying.”

“Are you asking me not to see Gloria again?”

“If you love me.”

“And if I promise not to see her, would you trust me?”

“Yes, yes. I’d have to.”

“Oh God, Lucy!” He half turned, his back to me. “How can I make any such damned-fool promise as that?” Without looking back he went out the door. I heard his step on the stair and in a moment the front door close behind him.

I got up slowly, awkwardly, and went into the bathroom and stood under the shower, grateful for the healing effect of cool water against my skin. When I returned to our room Sarah was there, perched on the stool in front of my dressing table. Her yellow-gold head reflected in the mirror in front of her lightened the room. I longed to hug her to me, warmth and brightness, passion’s flower. She wouldn’t have understood. I said:

“Where’s Betsy?”

“Still sleeping. Can’t you tell by the quiet?”

“Not always.” I went to the closet, my hand automatically reaching for one of the light, sleeveless, backless cottons that were my summer uniform. I came away with a bright red linen. It and I would undoubtedly be wilted in a matter of hours, but it did something for my spirit. Red for courage.

Sarah sniffed thoughtfully at a bottle of eau de cologne. “It smells like lemon. Why is it called Allure. Is it supposed to?”

“Mostly I find it cooling in summer,” I said perversely. Actually it had been a present from Flagg, who liked perfume on a woman. Gloria wore a great deal of it, a musky, sweet scent that lingered in a room long after she’d left it. I first noticed this on a winter afternoon during my last year in college. Mrs. Bartow invited me for tea. That she liked me I knew, but more from hearsay than from any real show of affection on her part. Whether or not she approved of her son’s assumption that some day we would be married I didn’t know. She was an extremely reserved woman. However, this invitation, written in her delicate hand and sent by Mr. Ferris, made it seem that she not only approved but was anxious to have me know it.

*My dear Lucinda,*

Could you find time to stop in at Menlo this afternoon at five for a cup of tea? Stark, as you know, has gone to Atlanta to see about a shipment of cattle. There will be just the two of us, and it would seem that we have much to talk about. I am not given to an easy display of emotion, but surely you know how fond of you we have become over the years.

Cordially yours,

*Elisabeth B. Bartow*

The “we” in this instance was purely hypothetical as Mr. Bartow had been bedridden with a stroke for the past four years and took little interest in anything or anyone.

Believing this to be an important occasion, I dressed with as much care as if it had been Stark himself I was going to meet. A lavender wool dress, the furs my father had given me for Christmas, and at my throat the brooch Stark had given me so many Christmases ago. Driving out to Menlo, I thought happily of the many times I’d been over this familiar road, knowing at the end of it I’d always find warmth and companionship. I thought of how lucky I’d been to have known always where my future lay. So many of my college classmates, rushing feverishly in and out of love, became hard and uncertain in the process. I was in no hurry for marriage. Nor, busy

converting half the acres of Menlo to nourish his cattle, was Stark. Ours was, I felt, a rare and changeless relationship.

Mrs. Bartow was waiting for me behind the silver tea service in the east parlor. There are women who, without the least claim to beauty, give an impression of beauty. Mrs. Bartow was one of these. You failed to notice that her nose was too long, her eyes too deeply set, her cheekbones overprominent; the over-all effect was one of extreme delicacy and elegance. White hair pulled softly back, white skin, thin, proudly held shoulders, and a voice so gently pitched it compelled all of your attention. She took my hand in greeting. Her smile was fleeting, the hand that held mine cold.

“You are looking very pretty today,” she said matter-of-factly and, releasing my hand, motioned me to a seat on the sofa beside her. I don’t know what I’d expected but certainly a warmer welcome. I found myself chattering nervously about how nice it was to be here, how sweet of her to have me. Patiently she heard me out, lifted the silver teapot to fill my cup.

“Cream? Sugar?” Her hand hovering over the tea tray trembled, and I noticed for the first time that her eyes resting on me had an anxious look. I willed my nervous tongue to silence, and in a moment she said:

“I perhaps had no right to ask you to come here today. I debated a long time before doing it. But I need your help, and I believe you need mine. You do love my son, do you not?”

Of course I loved him. Was he not my dearest friend? Closest confidant? And were not the shy embraces we exchanged the beginnings of desire? “I love him very much,” I said.

“Then you must help me save him,” she said and sighed and, as though the effort had already been too much for her, rested her head against the sofa back and closed her eyes. Until that moment I’d never seen any proof of the rumors of Mrs. Bartow’s queerness. True, she kept aloof from the world, devoting herself entirely to her husband and her son, but I’d thought that was simply the way she was made.

“From what must we save him?” I said lightly, lightness seeming the only way to treat the situation.

Slowly she opened her eyes and sidewise looked at me. “Has Stark spoken to you about or mentioned one of Mr. Bartow’s nurses?”

I couldn’t remember that he had, though he easily might have and I not listened carefully. “I don’t think so,” I said. “I’ve only been home a week

and seen Stark only twice.”

“Doesn’t that strike you as odd?”

“That he didn’t mention someone?”

“No, child, that you’ve seen him only twice?”

I hadn’t thought about it. He’d been busy with his cattle, I with Christmas shopping. “Stark and I’ve never put a lot of emphasis on being together every minute,” I said, trying not to sound impatient. I wondered if Mrs. Bartow was, after all, opposed to our marriage and was taking this silly means of letting me know it.

“He and this girl put a lot of emphasis on being together,” Mrs. Bartow said and leaned forward, placing her hand on mine. “I’m not trying to hurt you, believe me, Lucinda, but if you are to be any help to him now, before it’s too late, you had to know.”

“Know what?” I said, beginning unwillingly to feel some stirrings of apprehension.

“That Stark, that this nurse, that they . . .” She flushed and faltered, and I said:

“Are you trying to tell me you believe that Stark has fallen in love with someone else?” I withdrew my hand from hers and, feeling hot tears of anger gathering behind my lids, I half rose from the sofa, but Mrs. Bartow, mute and pleading, pulled me down again.

“Not love, child. Infatuation. As you undoubtedly know, Stark matured late where women were concerned, and this one has taken advantage of the fact. The thing must be put a stop to at once, and only you can do it, Lucinda. Only you can bring him to his senses.”

“I’m not sure I want to,” I said. Even though what she intimated might be true, I couldn’t yet feel it any business of mine. Young men, I had been told, often sowed a few wild oats before settling down. If this were the case with Stark, I wouldn’t condemn him, but I didn’t want to hear about it.

“I don’t blame you for being wounded,” Mrs. Bartow continued, misreading my protest, “but you mustn’t let pride stand in your way if you love Stark. This woman is determined she shall have him. I know it. I felt it from the first. There is a strange intensity about her, a willfulness that I don’t in the least understand, but it’s there like a presence in the room where she is.” Abruptly she stopped and looked toward the closed door to the study beyond, held up a silencing finger, and in a whisper said, “When she is

somewhere near I feel it. It's as though the air about her is displaced. Go and look, child." So firm was her command that reluctantly I went to the door, opened it. There was no one in sight, but something else assailed my senses, a fragrance somehow familiar to me and yet in my groping memory having no association with this house, a musky, sweet scent recollected from some distant time. I couldn't at once place it. To Mrs. Bartow I said:

"There's no one there." But I wasn't convinced that there hadn't been. And the whole scene had become suddenly distasteful to me. The spying mother, the son who dallied with the hired help, and myself asked to interfere. "I think you are taking all this much too seriously," I said with a bravado I no longer felt.

"Then you'll do nothing?" Her voice was desolate.

"What can I do but wait until it blows over? Anything else would only anger him if what you think is true."

"You could plead with him! Throw yourself at him as she is doing. It's you he loves and always has. Ever since you were children together. He only needs reminding."

Plead with Stark? Throw myself at him? It was all I could do to suppress a smile. I couldn't imagine who'd be more appalled at such a scene, he or I. "I can't possibly," I said and nervously gathered up gloves and pocketbook. This time Mrs. Bartow didn't try to detain me. She too got to her feet. Frail, elegant, and in her concern for her son touchingly vulnerable.

"It's because you don't know this woman that you treat the affair so lightly." She sighed, looked down at her hands, looked again at me. "She is very beautiful. More than that, she is vital. I am sure my son is not the first man who has been in love with her. Nor will he be the last. To me there are only two sorts of women, those who give and those who take. This one, Lucinda, is one who takes. Whatever her heart desires and without reckoning the cost to herself or others. For some reason I do not as yet understand she appears to have set her heart on Stark. But perhaps you do know her. She's been away a number of years, but she says she grew up in the town. Her name is McGill. Stark calls her Gloria."

"Gloria *here*? A nurse? You must be mistaken." But even as I waited for Mrs. Bartow to acknowledge the mistake I knew it was not one. The perfume—I recognized it now. A friend of Gloria's mother had presented her with a bottle of it when she was fifteen or thereabouts. "I don't care what it costs," Glory had said, showing it to me. "I'm always going to wear it. It

smells like places I've never been. I think perfume identifies a woman, don't you?"

"I'm not mistaken," Mrs. Bartow said. "She is here, and she is a nurse, and her name is Gloria McGill. You know her then?"

"I used to," I said and found my voice quavered over the words. They contained all that I'd heretofore known of loss. Lost childhood, lost friendship. The more immediate loss, the loss Glory had contrived for me, I didn't yet believe in. "I thought she went to New York to get on the stage. I thought that after her mother ran away with Mr. Green that that was where she went. I haven't heard from her in years. Not a word. When did she come back to Royal Bay?"

"That's another odd thing," Mrs. Bartow said. "She'd only been working in Dr. Reed's office a month when I received a note from her. I'd no idea who she was. She didn't tell me she was employed, just that she was a nurse and had heard we were having trouble getting nurses. She asked for an interview. She made a most favorable first impression. So many of these people are irritatingly obsequious. She, though well mannered, I felt, had a mind of her own. She was so lovely to look at I was sure she'd cheer any sickroom. I hired her on the spot. She gave Dr. Reed as a reference. When I called him about her he was shocked. He'd had no idea she wasn't perfectly content in her job. He said she'd applied for the position with him almost as soon as she started training in New York and had kept in touch with him until she graduated. He'd been moved by her eagerness to live in Royal Bay. He was even more astonished when I told him what I planned to pay her, because it wasn't as much as she'd been getting in his office. I suppose I should have been warned by that, but I wasn't. Of course I offered to renege on the whole business right then and there, but Dr. Reed wouldn't hear of it. He said it never paid to keep someone on against their will. And so"—Mrs. Bartow spread her hands in an open gesture of despair—"it's been a strange business from the start, almost as though it were planned." She broke off and looked at me questioningly, beseechingly.

I opened my mouth to answer Mrs. Bartow's unspoken question and found that no words came. My thoughts whirled about in my head like the tormented fragments inside a twisted kaleidoscope. Glory that first day at Menlo, eyes large with excitement, color staining her cheeks—"Lordy, it's grand!" "What if I never get to come back? It'd be like having the gates of heaven shut in my face." "I'll have to make Stark like me if I ever want to come back!"

Glory in the kitchen on Palm Street, parading in the tiara that had been her father's dying wish for her—"I'll stand in front of that huge mirror in the front hall. No, no, the stairs are better. I'll come down those stairs so wide and polished . . . give them all a chance to see the new mistress of— You didn't guess, did you, Lucy? Told wishes never come true."

Planned? No, not planned. Dreamed. And then made to come to pass.

"I can't help you," I said to Mrs. Bartow. "I can't help anyone. You or Stark or myself. Whatever happens happened a long time ago. Tell Stark. Tell him." It was all I could do to contain the tears that I felt would drown me if I unleashed them. "No, no, don't tell him anything. When there is something to tell, he will tell it himself. We haven't been friends all these years for nothing." My voice broke, and I all but ran from the room. Again in the hall I encountered the pungent, heavy odor of Glory's perfume. Stronger now. I stopped and turned. "Gloria?" I said; then, once more, "Gloria?" But there was no sound anywhere in all that great house except the wild, pained beating of my heart.

## CHAPTER 8

If only it had ended there. Then and there in the empty hall. The story finished. Done. Completed. If only I could have walked away from Menlo that day, away from Stark, away from Gloria, and never looked back! I wanted to. I remember little about the drive into town except that I was stopped just past Cutler's Corners by a patrolman. He was very kind. He told me to slow down and let it go at that. On the outskirts of Royal Bay, instead of taking a right turn, the shortest route home, I turned left and drove slowly down Palm Street. I knew that the photography shop was now a drugstore and that the windows above it had remained dark and curtainless ever since Mrs. McGill and Mr. Green had decided to forget about Mr. Green's wife and three children and make a new life for themselves elsewhere. I don't know what compelled me to take this route, to pause a moment to gaze blankly at the neon druggist's sign outside, the gaily lit, overstocked Christmas windows below it. I can't remember that I felt anything but tired and suddenly desperately lonely.

Stark called me the next morning to talk about a dance we were going to together that night. I was shocked to find no change in the voice that greeted me so cheerily across the wires. I was astonished that he could talk with such blithe unconcern about the evening ahead. What was I wearing? He wanted to send me a corsage. He wanted it to be the right color. He couldn't sound like this, talk like this if . . . Could he? All day I alternated between hope and despair. Surely I'd know when I saw him, wouldn't I? But I didn't know. Or wouldn't let myself. True, he looked tired, drawn. But he was working hard on this cattle venture. So much depended on it. He had to justify his refusal to leave Menlo.

I had decided after much inner debate to wear the brooch he'd given me those many Christmases ago. My dress was black—my first venture in adult sophistication. The flowers he'd got for me to wear with it were white. No florist's beribboned confection, but plucked himself from the camellia bush beside the gate at Menlo. He pinned it on my dress there in front of the fire in our living room with my father looking benignly on.

"Your daughter is growing up," Stark said, his eyes suddenly anxious, as though the fact came as a troubling surprise to him.

“It happens.” My father sighed. “No way of stopping it. One minute you’re a young man making your way in the world, coming home at night to dandle a baby on your knee, and the next you’re an old man left sitting by the fire while that baby goes out to dance the night away. Have fun, you two!” He waved us toward the door.

My mother, who had not been well since Thanksgiving, called down from upstairs, echoing his command, “Have fun!”

“We will, we will!” I cried, wanting to believe it.

The dance was given at Colonial Hall by Sue Willett’s parents in celebration of her engagement to Tommy Smythe. The hall, which it was said had once served a Yankee general and his troops of occupation, was large and bare and cold, but no one who’d lived in Royal Bay for more than two generations considered the new country club a fitting substitute. Nor was it. Smilax and magnolia boughs were twined about the high rafters. Hundreds of candles bloomed on the deep-silled window ledges, the only light; the gowns of the girls the only color.

“Setting for a ballet,” Stark murmured as he guided me through the receiving line: Mr. and Mrs. Willett, looking terribly smug and a little relieved; Mr. and Mrs. Smythe, looking neither; Sue, glowing and possessive; Tommy, trying to appear as though this were an everyday occurrence. “Such a lovely dress.” “Yes, Sue does look radiant, doesn’t she?” “And how is your mother?” We were through at last. Free to dance.

“Whose ballet?” I said as we glided across the floor.

“Strauss, I think.”

“But he never wrote one.”

“Well, if he had.”

“Setting for a tone poem perhaps. He wrote lots of those.”

“Depressing, all of them.”

“Not ‘Harold in Italy’ surely.”

“I have it. Ponchielli!”

“Is that a tone poem?”

“No, silly, he wrote ballet—‘Dance of the Hours.’ Or, if you like, Adolphe Adam . . . Giselle.”

This was the Stark I knew . . . and loved. His mother must be mad to think him changed, our relationship altered. Secure in his arms, the music moving us as one, the grim little scene in the parlor at Menlo seemed infinitely far away, a dream. A very bad dream. Someone cut in on us. I looked up into the merry, teasing eyes of Flagg Thorpe.

“Remember me?”

“Of course.” My eyes over his shoulder followed Stark. “You are the boy who never would dance with me at Miss Hughes’s.”

“And you were the only girl there I ever thought about afterward.”

“Really!” Stark wasn’t dancing. He stood on the side lines looking all at once bored, miles away. “Aren’t we a little old for this sort of malarkey?”

“Never too old for the truth. Wrong timing. Sorry.” With that he gave himself up to the music, whirling me, swirling me around the dance floor as though I were nothing but wings and the tiniest feet imaginable. I was excruciatingly aware of his hand on my shoulder, of the music, of myself made suddenly light and desirable. The music stopped, leaving me giddy, uncertain. Myself again. I looked about for Stark, and as I did so someone else cut in. A stranger. A boy from Charleston. Over his shoulder I located Stark again. Still standing on the side lines. When it became apparent that I was going to be stuck with my new partner, he came to the rescue.

“Why aren’t you dancing?” I asked him.

“But I am. With you.”

“You must at least dance with Sue. She will expect it.”

“I mean to.”

And dutifully, as soon as he could, he did dance with Sue. But she was the only one. For the most part he stood indifferently aside, keeping, I had to admit, an eye on me to see that I never danced too long for comfort with one partner.

“You don’t *have* to come to my rescue every time,” I said finally. “Have you lost your taste for dancing? Or do you think I take so much looking after you don’t dare dance with anyone else?”

“I want you to have a good time,” he said.

“But I’m having a good time. A marvelous time!”

“I most especially want you to have a good time tonight,” he said and held me away from him and smiled down at me, a funny twisted smile that went through me like pain.

“Why tonight?” I wondered that my voice could sound so light.

“Because,” he said soberly, “I may not always be able to see that you have a good time.”

My heart lurched. My throat felt dry. “Going away somewhere?” I smiled through stiff lips.

“Something of the sort,” he said. “You aren’t in love with me, are you, Lucy? I’ve never felt that you were. Not crazy, madly in love.” His look was probing, anxious. It left me no doubt as to what he wished me to say.

“Not crazy, not madly, whatever that means. I love you very much, whatever that means. What are you trying to tell me, Stark?”

“It can wait. Listen! They are playing a waltz. Do you remember that I taught you to waltz?” He held me close. One-two-three, one-two-three, around the room we went stiffly elegant, commanding approval from the chaperones and at least one overheard comment from the stag line. “No use cutting in—that’s Bartow, the man she’s going to marry.” One-two-three. My feet were like lead. When it was over, I asked Stark to take me home. We drove in silence through the silent streets. Here and there a Christmas tree spangled with lights beckoned from a window.

My father had left the lights on in the living room, and the fire still burned low and fitfully in the fireplace. As usual, Stark followed me in. As usual, I went back to the kitchen to heat milk and chocolate and see what there was in the icebox that might please him.

Tonight he followed me into the kitchen. Stood watching me uncomfortably as I went about pouring milk into a saucepan, arranging cups and saucers on a tray, cutting thin slices of turkey.

“You shouldn’t go to so much trouble,” he said.

“Habit,” I said shortly, and then seeing how pale, how strained he looked in the bright, hard light from the shadeless bulb which hung from the ceiling, I added, “Go and sit down. I’ll only be a minute.”

“I’d rather not,” he said. “I’d rather get this over with now if you’ll stop all this business for a minute and let me talk to you.”

“Right here?”

“Bright lights make it easier. Sit down. You look so—so defenseless standing up.”

“I’d rather stand.”

“I’m in love, Lucy. Crazy, mad in love. Her name is Gloria. She says she used to know you, that you and she were once friends. I hope you still can be because I’m going to marry her.” He walked to where I stood, cupped my chin in his hand, forced my eyes to meet his. “I don’t want to hurt you. Say that I haven’t.”

“Does she love you?” Was it anger or pain that made my voice harsh? I didn’t know. Perhaps both.

“Ever since a day when you brought her out to Menlo when we were still children.”

“Did she tell you that?”

“Yes. She has a tenacious heart. Not that it matters. I’d love her whatever she felt.”

“Then what can I say?” I said, and as I spoke I unfastened the brooch at my neck and handed it to him. “We never were officially engaged, you know. Just friends. Loving friends.” I managed a smile as I handed him the brooch.

“It’s yours. I gave it to you. I wanted you to have it.”

“It’s your grandmother’s. It belongs at Menlo.” He held it for a moment in his open palm. Stared at it, unseeing. Tears gutted his eyes.

“God, Lucy, I wanted it to be you! I always wanted it to be you. Meant that it should be. I can’t help it that it isn’t. I didn’t know love was like this. I didn’t *know* . . . Don’t ask me to explain. I can’t. I only know I can’t live without her. Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t. Without her I’d be only half alive. Half a man. You wouldn’t want me. No one would.” He shoved the brooch into his pocket, turned, and started from the room.

“Don’t let her hurt you,” I cried after him. “I’ll never forgive her if she does. Tell her that, Stark. Tell her that from me!”

They were married that spring three weeks after Stark’s father died. They were married by a justice of the peace in Charleston. I have saved the letters I received at the time. My mother wrote:

*My darling daughter,*

I do hope the news of Stark Bartow's marriage did not come to you as the shock it did to us. Your father and I had thought at Christmas that whatever it was that happened between you and Stark was nothing more serious than a lover's quarrel. Dear child, I wish you could have found it in your heart to have shared your troubles, whatever they were, with us.

I do hope that you were prepared and not too hurt by what has happened. The Bible tells us that all happens for the best. But Glory McGill of all people! I daresay she is a spirited, courageous girl, but I was never happy about your friendship with her. They say Mrs. Bartow is prostrate with grief. First her husband's death and now this. And we always thought Stark such a stolid, mature boy. And you and he so suited to each other. Ah well, best to be mistaken soon than late.

Your father has gone hunting today. I am feeling much better than I did at Christmas, but Dr. Peyton says I must be patient, that it will still be a few weeks before I can venture forth again. I am afraid there is no chance of my getting to your graduation. Your father will have to do the honors.

Dear Lucy, you would let us know if you are unhappy, wouldn't you?

*Your loving Mother*

Miriam, studying art in New Orleans, wrote:

*Darling Lucy,*

I can't tell you how shocked I was to hear about Stark's marriage to that strange McGill girl. It is the one I think it is, isn't it? The one that came to your birthday party that time all decked out in frills and laces? The photographer's daughter? Do you suppose he *had* to marry her? It's the only thing that makes any sense. Mother writes that she's grown very beautiful, but Stark always struck me as terribly sober, not the sort to be swept off his feet by a pretty face. I know you two were never exactly lovey-dovey, but everyone always felt you had "an understanding." I hope this didn't come as a crashing blow to you.

Don't forget there are plenty of other fish in the sea! Speaking of the sea, do you think you could persuade your family to let you go to Europe next summer? The problem is that I've got a chance to study for a month in Paris—*free*—only Mother and Dad won't hear of it unless I can get someone to go with me. I've told them two can get into more trouble than one, but they're adamant. Either I find a traveling companion or I stay right in Royal Bay. Are you interested? Let me know as soon as possible.

Love,  
*Miriam*

P.S. Is it true that Flagg Thorpe quit college and went to work so he could buy a shrimp boat? His parents should know by now he's not to be tamed. God help the girl who marries him!

*M*

Susan Willett, now ecstatically Susan Smythe, wrote:

*Dear Lucy,*

Tommy and I both want to thank you for the lovely little silver pitcher. It is sitting beside me on the desk right now with a yellow rose in it. I can't wait for you to get home this summer and see our darling apartment. Honestly, Lucy, married life is simply "marvy!" Speaking of married life, I'm sure by now you've heard all about Prince Bartow and Cinderella? It shook the whole town. Even though I know you weren't ever *really* in love with him, I guess it shook you too. He took her to New York on a honeymoon, and you should *see* the clothes she bought! They gave a sort of an announcement party last week and invited just about the whole town. His mother wasn't there. They say she's gotten queer as queer since all of this and stays in her rooms all day. Won't even come down for meals. Gloria and Stark received. Honestly, you'd have thought she'd been doing it all her life. She wore the most elegant pink brocade dress you ever saw and, of all things, a tiara on her head. She greeted everyone as though she'd never met any of us before. In a way, I guess, she hadn't. You wouldn't know Stark. Fatuous. They say he can't do enough for her. For a wedding present he gave her the deed to Menlo! I guess he

thought that was symbolic. Everyone knows he loves Menlo better than life. Or did. . . .

I know now that Stark didn't break my heart. I think I even knew it then, but I was deeply bereft and left alone to deal with all the unanswered questions as best I could. Outrage sustained me for a while, but when time had worn that protection thin, I was left with nothing but an overwhelming sense of inadequacy that colored the last weeks and days of my college life. Not only had I lost all sense of joy and anticipation, all belief in the future; I had lost the one person in whom I could have confided my bewilderment and my pain. I had, in truth, lost my best friend. In unguarded moments I would find myself holding long inner debates with Stark on the meaning of love, of life. Aroused from these meanderings, I felt more alone than ever. Of Gloria I tried not to think at all.

The New England spring which had never failed to delight and enchant me with all its giddy, colorful promise of unfurling life, of secrets to be revealed, of tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow waiting to be explored, seemed now to mock me. I who remained suspended, the chill of winter still clinging to my bones.

My faculty adviser, Miss Nesbitt, a fierce, tiny, little woman whose entire life as nearly as I could make out was dedicated to the teaching of Renaissance literature and the collecting of porcelain figurines, called me into her office a few weeks before our final examinations would begin.

"You needn't look so proud and tight-lipped," she said abruptly. "I've no intention of prying into your private life, if that's what's worrying you. I'm not the dean of the bleeding-hearts department. It's your marks that I'm concerned with. Your last few papers have not been up to your usual excellence. They have, in fact, been incredibly poor. I feel it only fair to warn you that unless your final examination balances them out I cannot give you a passing grade for this semester."

I was stunned. I knew that my work had not been up to par, but I'd no idea I stood the slightest chance of failure.

"You mean, then," I stammered, "that I might not graduate?" This failure, following so close on the heels of that other one, could not be borne.

"I mean exactly that," Miss Nesbitt said ruthlessly and tapped a silver pencil against her desk's edge, always a signal that the conference was ended.

“But . . .” I protested and could not go on. But what? I had no one to blame but myself, though my frantic thoughts scurried hither and thither attaching blame—Stark, Gloria, Miss Nesbitt herself. No one but myself. “I am going to graduate,” I said almost rudely to Miss Nesbitt, “even if it takes every minute of every hour from now until exams. You’ll see!”

It may not have taken every minute of every hour, but I’d never worked harder in my life than I worked in that time left to me. I came off with flying colors, but none more cheering than the note I received from Miss Nesbitt the day after marks were posted. “Bravo,” she wrote with the stubby pen that made everything she wrote appear important. “The publishing firm of Tennant and Gibs in New York has asked my department to recommend a senior to start as a reader with them next fall. It’s only a beginning, but the possibilities are limitless. I have recommended you. I suggest you write to them immediately if you are interested.” Interested! It was the answer to a prayer! If I went to Europe with Miriam for the summer as I’d already planned to do and had this job awaiting me on my return, I need not return to Royal Bay at all. Not ever! I leaned out my dormitory window and inhaled deeply of the light spring air, my eyes drinking in, at last, the poetry of forsythia and purple iris blooming side by side along the campus walks.

I was not so sure that Miss Nesbitt was not dean of the bleeding-hearts department after all.

My father came north for my graduation. Mother, he said, was ever so much better, had even gone to her favorite book-club meeting the week before, but Dr. Peyton did not think a long trip advisable as yet.

I would have had to be self-absorbed indeed not to have been caught up in the excitement of graduation. For days the senior dormitory had been a place of confusion, of laughter, of tears, of satiric toasts drunk in tomato juice in the middle of the night, of half-filled trunks, of half-bare rooms.

Only when I found myself sitting in cap and gown on the stage of the auditorium did I think suddenly and without warning of Stark. It had been just such a day as this, blue and clear and full of hope, that I’d attended his graduation at Princeton. For a moment my chest felt tight and my eyes burned dangerously, but among the sea of faces below me I found my father smiling up at me, and in a minute the dean began to speak. I knew that I must listen. For wasn’t this a day I was supposed to remember always?

My parents understood my wish to spend the week before my boat sailed in New York, with one of my classmates. My father, having seen to everything—passports, tickets, the pension in Paris where Miriam and I

were to stay—returned to Royal Bay. We were to sail on June 8. On June 6 my mother died of a heart attack. Only then did I learn that it was her second.

## CHAPTER 9

The only thing that made that summer bearable was that I was distracted from my own grief by my father's. The children of a happy marriage are apt to think of the union of their parents as a kind of mundane partnership devised and maintained solely for their protection and comfort. My father's passionate, youthful grief came as a shock to me. And an awakening. My proud, my strong father rendered suddenly helpless and forlorn. Our roles temporarily reversed. For weeks he couldn't bring himself to go to the courthouse or his offices. "I'd rather stay close awhile. If I don't go anywhere then I don't have to face coming back to find her gone."

The house seemed empty and strange. However, I had much to keep me occupied. Learning to run a fair-sized house even with the help of servants was, I found, no simple matter. First of all I had to learn to run the servants. Emma, aging and taciturn, treated me as a child still and regarded my first fumbling attempts at ordering meals and making grocery lists with an amusement bordering on impertinence. Had I been older, wiser, less anxious to prove myself, I might have found this silent battle for authority amusing, touching even, but, wretched in my grief and in desperate need of diversion, I burned to wrest the management of the household from her.

"Don't you see, Emma, I want to learn. I need to . . ." The wrong tack entirely. The child begging privileges beyond my years. Encroaching.

"You'll learn, you'll learn in time." Emma would nod sagely. "Now stop worrying your pretty head and leave me see to it the judge gets his proper victuals."

With Rosa, the laundress, and Mac, the yard boy, I was more fortunate. Rosa taught me how to iron a man's shirt and how to mend the fine lace edges of my mother's best tablecloths so that you'd never guess at the years of service they'd had. Mac not only instructed me in the care and planting of perennials but also showed me how to polish a windowpane, so that it sparkled like crystal and brought the outdoors right into a room, and how to keep old floors looking smooth and cared for.

The days were not intolerable, but the evenings were not so easily disposed of. My father could not bring himself to have the evening meal served in the dining room, where the absence of my mother's voice and

presence made an insurmountable barrenness, an echoing silence, around us. After a cold supper eaten on the piazza by lantern light my father would suggest a game of cards or a walk around the block in the cool of the evening. I can't remember that my mother and father entertained each other in the evenings—my memory places him deep in a book or a brief while my mother sewed or read nearby—and I found his dependency on me pathetically sad.

Promptly at ten he would take a tablet the doctor had given him for sleeping and a glass of water and climb the stairs heavily to bed. It was then, with the closing of his door and the creaking of the house as it settled to the night's different pressures, that I fought back tears of frustration and self-pity. It was then that I must will myself not to think of the college degree that lay gathering dust in my dresser, nor must I let my lonely thoughts carry me over field and causeway down the long avenue of oak and pine to an easier, happier past.

I read. Anything light, inconsequential. I often read until the words blurred before my eyes and the book dropped from my hands. And I wrote letters.

“Dear Mr. and Mrs. Barnes, Your thoughts of us at this time . . . the flowers were lovely . . . I'm sure that Mother . . .” The hardest of all was the letter I finally brought myself to write to the New York publishing firm. I didn't discuss this letter with my father. He would have protested his need, but I could see that for the time being my place was here. “Dear Sirs: It is with real regret . . . Perhaps next year if you can still use me . . .” Would they guess that the slight blotch on the signature had been made by a tear?

Not entirely trusting the strength of my resolve, I took the letter to the post office myself. It was on my way out of the post office that I ran into Gloria Bartow. I'd known that sooner or later we were bound to meet, but still I was unprepared. She was coming up the post-office steps as I went down them. She wore a green dress the exact color of her eyes, though perhaps it was the dress that made them so. The black, unruly hair, smooth now and shining, was pinned close to her head, coiled loosely at the nape of her neck. I wondered if I'd forgotten how beautiful she was or if this dazzling alignment of feature and coloring had come about in the years since I'd seen her. She'd been about to brush past me as though I weren't there, but my startled, inquisitive glance made this impossible. She paused, pretending to have only that moment seen me.

“Why, Lucy Fenwick, I hardly recognized you, it’s been such a long time.” She held out a hand heavy with jewels. Confused, unrehearsed for the role, I stared uncertainly at the proffered hand. Shrugging, she withdrew it.

“I was sorry to hear about your mother,” she said. “She was always good to me.”

“She was a lady,” I said. “She was good to everyone.” Our eyes met for an instant, and in Gloria’s I detected a flash of the old, proud defensiveness. It was momentary. What need had she for defenses now?

“We sent flowers,” she said. I hoped she couldn’t guess what that careless “we” did to my heart. “Did you get them?”

I had got them. And the card Stark had enclosed—“Dear Lucy, if only there were something I could do. You will let me know if there is, won’t you?” It was signed with just the letter S. I wondered if Gloria knew about the card. Petty as it might be, I hoped that she did not. “Lilies, weren’t they?” I said, knowing full well they had been roses. “Yes, we got them.” I turned away, anxious to be done with this grotesque meeting, but suddenly she grasped my arm.

“You’ve no right to hate me!” she said in a low and furious voice. “All your life you’ve had everything you ever wanted. You could have had Stark, too, if you’d not been so prissy about the way you wanted him. I only took what was there for the plucking. You’ve no right to hate me for that.”

“But you didn’t really want him,” I said slowly, painfully. “You only wanted Menlo, and you didn’t care what you did to him or any of us to get it. I don’t hate you. I despise you.” I pulled free of the hand on my arm and fled down the remaining post-office steps, the scent of her perfume still engulfing me in a suffocating cloud.

I had walked to the post office and there was nothing for it but to walk home, though I felt hot and shaken and thoroughly spent. I was within sight of the familiar piazzaed house on Bay Street when a bruised convertible drew up beside me and a gay, masculine voice said, “Want a lift?”

I looked up into the sun-scarred, smiling face of Flagg Thorpe. “I’m almost there,” I said, unaccountably flustered that he should encounter me now, hair awry, a flush of anger still staining my cheeks.

“Almost but not quite.” He reached over and opened the car door. Gratefully I got in beside him. I saw then that he was wearing sea boots, blue jeans, and a shirt that was open at the neck, revealing, to my acute discomfort, hair as gold-red as that atop his head.

“I thought you were away working somewhere. What are you doing back?” Shyness made me sound disapproving. But to tell the truth, I found this sudden proximity to so much that was male and renownedly predatory oddly disturbing. I scarcely knew what I said. The open shirt front didn’t help.

“What am I doing back?” Looking sidewise down at me, he repeated my question. “You make it sound as though I’d broken bounds. Escaped! And you’re not far off. I worked for a while in a factory up North. Saving for my boat. Then I got a chance to pick up a two-year-old trawler and a backer. I’ve just been giving her bottom a scraping. Would you like to see her?”

We’d by now reached my house. He’d stopped the car but hopefully not its motor. “I’ve got her up on the ways at the boat yard. Not far.” Sea-blue eyes searched mine questioningly. “Please don’t be afraid of me. Anything but that!”

“I’d love to go,” I said, astonished that he should have been so quick to see through my hesitation.

I know now that that invitation, so seemingly casual, was, coming from Flagg, tantamount to a declaration of love. That boat, his first *Miss Pritchard*, was not only his heart’s desire but represented his final victory in the long, hard-fought battle with his parents. The *Miss Pritchard* was not just a boat; she was the spirit of freedom, the symbol of his right to be himself whatever discomfort it might cost those he loved. And he wanted to show her to me. However, I knew none of this on that faraway summer’s afternoon. We bounced over the rutted road leading to the boat works, he riding to the jolts like a cowboy in the saddle, I clutching at my loosened hair and the door’s edge.

“You can’t get too much of an idea about her now,” he said. “She still needs another coat of paint, and her hull needs some work. But she’s got good lines, and I’m rigging her with new nets.”

The proud father preparing me for whatever defects my unbiased eye might find!

We scrambled over upturned bateaux, bits and pieces of discarded boat engines, and down to the water’s edge where *Miss Pritchard*, landlocked for repairs, stood high in the air above us. “There she is!” There was such a singing in his voice that I found myself looking not so much at the trawler as at him. It was not the wayward boy from Pritchard’s Island with the bold, fearless eyes that had so intimidated me at Miss Hughes’s dancing class that I saw. His eyes, resting on his boat, were alight; tenderness and triumph

mingled. Pride was in the set of his jaw, joy in the curved line of his mouth. Startled, I thought, not wayward—spirited! Not stubborn—sure. Not rash—a creature of joyous impulse.

“Well, what do you think of her?”

“Magnificent!” Had I thought her monstrous, I would have said the same.

“Then you must be the first to come aboard when we sail. I hope to have her ready before the end of the season. Are you going to be around awhile?”

His question caught me off guard. I’d for the moment forgotten—or rather taken leave of—my mother’s death, the letter I’d so reluctantly put in the mail only a little earlier! Now it all came back. But too quickly and all at once. To my horror tears gathered in my eyes, spilled over. There was nothing I could do to stop them. Dumbly, helplessly, I looked at Flagg, tried to speak, found I couldn’t.

“There, there,” he said distractedly. “There, there. Did I say the wrong thing?”

“No, no.” I shook my head and took the paint-spattered handkerchief he offered me. “I’m so sorry. It’s just that, yes, I am going to be around awhile and I’m not very happy about it. This year was to have been a beginning and now—well, it looks more like an ending. You must think me an awful fool.”

“I think you’re the loveliest girl I ever knew. I’ve thought so for a long, long time. I wasn’t going to tell you until . . . well, until I thought you’d like to hear it. But maybe you need it more now.”

“Oh, yes indeed, a girl always needs that sort of thing,” I said, determined not to take him seriously.

“You couldn’t be more mistaken,” he said with a sudden, impatient shifting of his weight. “What was it you called it the last time? Malarkey? Why won’t you take me seriously? Who are you trying to protect, Lucy? Yourself or me?” Blue eyes directed straight at mine dared me make light of the question. Sun glinted on red-gold hair; my pulse quickened alarmingly; my legs felt suddenly weak.

“Both of us,” I said quickly, honestly. “I’m not your kind of girl. We’re different as different . . . you—”

“Just what is my kind of a girl?” he interrupted rudely.

I flushed, remembering half-forgotten rumors, bits of high-school gossip, but that wasn't what I meant. I knew as well as he that those talked-about girls, the soft, the pretty ones, the easy conquests were not what he would finally choose. "Your girl should be beautiful and strong and just as willful as you," I said. "Someone who is not afraid of anything or anyone . . ." I broke off suddenly, sickeningly aware of who, unwittingly, I described. But he wouldn't know.

"A chip off the old block? An identical rib? A partner to all my faults?" Gravely he shook his head. "Matching halves don't always make a whole, Lucy. With you, my mismatched one, I could be complete. My strength your weakness, my weakness your strength." Suddenly he smiled. "You see, I've thought about it a long time. Even you must see that. Otherwise how'd I have all the answers?"

"Heaven only knows!" I exclaimed. "But I don't want any more of them now. I've trouble enough digesting these. Besides, Father will be wondering where I am." I daresay I sounded more in control of the situation than I felt. I sincerely hoped so. In the space of a few short hours I felt I'd completely lost my bearings. It was all very well for him to assert that I was no stranger to him, but that made him no less a stranger to me. A stranger whose nearness I found, seated once more next to him in the car, frighteningly disturbing. What was he asking of me and why? I tried to think, to reason, but it would seem thought and reason had deserted me. I rested my head against the seat back and let the sun beat against my closed eyes, let this new strange inner warmth spread outward, tingling down my arms to the tips of my fingers. In no time at all, it seemed, we were stopped in front of my father's house. It would have been only courtesy to ask him in for a minute, but I didn't. Some perversity of spirit made me want to deny him, to deny myself.

I was to learn that he, too, could be perverse. It was weeks before I heard from him again. I vacillated between an uncontrollable longing to see him and fear that I might and that it would not be the same as last time. Just as I was on the point of making a determined effort to forget him, he telephoned. I was startled to find that his voice apparently had the same effect on me as his presence. Or was it that his voice evoked his presence? Vibrant, colorful, persuasive? I felt weak, reason suspended.

"What have you been doing?"

"What have I been doing?" I was surprised I could make even so vacant a reply. "Nothing spectacular. And you?"

“I’ve been to Florida looking for a secondhand compass. And then down the Keys looking for a barracuda so an oil tycoon from Texas could catch him. Friend of mine takes out fishing parties. He wanted a vacation. I wanted the money.”

“Did you find the compass?”

“No, but I picked up enough money to buy a new one and dinner for two. What are you doing tonight?”

Three weeks of silence and now on an hour’s notice I was supposed to leap at the chance! I thrashed about in my mind for a plausible excuse. Found none. Didn’t want to. “Nothing,” I said humbly.

“Can you be ready in an hour? I thought we might go to Charleston. Get away from whatever it is around here that makes you cry when you think about it.”

My father was pleased when I told him I planned to go out for the evening until he learned who my escort would be. “Granted I’ve never met the boy myself that I remember, but from what I hear of him I can’t see why you’d want to waste your time on him.”

“What do you hear about him?” I tried not to let him see that he’d struck a match to burning timber.

“Nothing really incriminating. Only that he’s given his parents a hard time. No ambition other than to spend his life around the water. Couldn’t keep him in boarding school. Quit college. In another boy it might be one thing, but with his background and advantages there’s no excuse for him. The Flags are fine people. I don’t know anything about his father’s family,” my father said with the proud disregard with which he looked on anyone who’d not been born and bred within a stone’s throw of Royal Bay. “However, his father’s service record was excellent, and if he hadn’t been somebody, Clara Flaggs would never have married him.”

“He is a nonconformist, if that’s what you mean,” I said. “I rather admire him for it.”

“Admire?” My father removed his glasses and began industriously to clean them, a habit he had when he was vexed. “It would seem this is more serious than I realized. How long have you been seeing this lad?”

Time was passing, and I had to dress. “I haven’t been ‘seeing him’ at all really. Tonight will be the first time I’ve gone out with him—formally.” I inched toward the door.

“Then perhaps it isn’t too late to ask you to accept my judgment and make this the last time.”

I had to remind myself that my father was not himself, could not be expected to be for a while. “We’ll see,” I placated. “I promise I’ll do nothing rash.” What an empty promise that turned out to be! It was sunset when we set out for Charleston. A lavender-pink sunset staining the trunks of trees and the stalactite moss. As we crossed the Combahee River, with its edging of marshes and empty paddy fields, Flagg slowed the car. Lavender pink was darkening to purple. Purple marshes, purple water, and in the farthest trees white herons stretched and folded in their wings for the night. Stark would have had a word for it, an analogy . . . still life by Cézanne? Flagg sighed deeply, took my hand in his, held it between us on the seat as we drove in silence across causeways and bridges and into the woods at the other side. Only then did he speak.

“Shall we eat at Francine’s? Or the Gatehouse?”

He didn’t understand my delighted laughter, nor could I explain it to him. We ate at Francine’s in a tiny walled garden lit by lanterns. I don’t remember what we ate. We drank sparkling burgundy. We talked very little. A young man with an accordion moved from table to table asking for requests. Flagg asked him to play “The Gypsy Waltz”—“Come with me where starlight . . .” Across the table his eyes sought mine. “Come with me where starlight lights the way.” I was thankful for those others present and for the lanterns, for everything and anything that guarded me from the full impact of the music and those eyes smiling into mine.

We drove home slowly, the top down, moonlight washing away the wine’s drowsy effects. When we reached the Combahee he stopped the car. I’d known all along that he would. He took me in his arms. I’d known this too. I had not known that the world would be blotted out and I with it. I, Lucy Fenwick, an entity no longer. Death, rebirth contained in a man’s arms, in a man’s mouth against mine. Trembling, I pushed him away. “I’m afraid,” I whispered.

“Of me?” Troubled, he looked down at me.

“Of how I feel, of how you make me feel. Witless and lost . . .” I sat up, straightened my hair, avoided his eyes. Myself again. “I’m sure there’s some perfectly logical explanation—hormones and moonlight . . .”

“Nonsense!” His voice was harsh; he pulled me to him roughly. Tilted my head so that I must look at him. “I love you, Lucy Fenwick. What are

you going to do about it? Kill it with schoolgirl platitudes and textbook explanations?”

“No, no.” I held up my hand to silence him. “I’m sorry. Forgive me. I’ll be just as witless and lost as you want me . . .” This time when he kissed me I did not draw away.

It was almost dawn when we got home. To my chagrin I saw that a light burned in my father’s bedroom. Flagg saw it too.

“Does he always wait up for you?”

“He’s not been sleeping well lately.” I wasn’t going to let Flagg see what that light did to me. How abruptly it brought me back to reality.

“I’m going in with you,” Flagg said, not fooled for a moment.

“No! You mustn’t!”

“But I must.” He walked around the car, opened the door for me.

The hour, my father’s potential wrath, a growing sense of unreality about the evening behind me contrived to make me panic. “Please! You must let me handle this. He doesn’t approve of you. You’ll only make it worse.”

“In that case . . .” He grasped my arm firmly, propelled me up the front steps, and with my key unlocked the front door.

My father must have leaped from his bed at the first sound of key in lock. He was standing at the head of the stairs in pajamas and bathrobe, looking, in spite of this garb, every inch the judge.

“I thought you’d had an accident!” He looked down not at me but Flagg, and I wished I could warn him that when my father spoke in this quiet, noncommittal way it meant that he was very angry indeed.

“No accident,” Flagg said. “I’m sorry if we’ve worried you. We left Charleston late and took our time.”

“I’d no idea,” I blurted. “I didn’t realize it was so late.”

“In my day when a *gentleman* took a girl out he saw to it that she was brought home at a decent hour.” My father glared at Flagg, waiting for the inference to sink in.

“Even when he was in love with her?” Flagg’s smile was, I thought, thoroughly disarming. Not so my father.

“This has gone far enough!” he thundered. “I’ll thank you to meet me at my office tomorrow. Today, as a matter of fact. At ten o’clock.” He turned

on his heel with a ridiculous flourish of bathrobe and slippers.

“I’ll be there!” Flagg called after him.

Quickly Flagg kissed me. “Worry not, my pet.” But I was worried. Things were moving too rapidly for me. “Don’t commit yourself to him,” I said. “You don’t need to.”

“But I am committed.”

“Then don’t commit me,” I pled. “Not yet.” And at his expression of utter bafflement I added, “Oh, I’d go with you to the ends of the earth. Surely after tonight you know that. But to Father love means only one thing — marriage.”

“And to you?” His look was no longer baffled; it was angry.

“I don’t know,” I murmured. “I don’t know. I haven’t thought.”

“Then you’d better start thinking!”

After he’d gone I walked out to the sea wall and sat on the prickly tabby stones that protected my mother’s garden from the incoming tides and tried to think, but I could still feel the shape of his mouth on mine, the bruise of his kiss on my throat, the brittle texture of red-gold hair against my finger tips. So this was what had happened to Stark! This sudden, startled awakening of the heart? This being swept along willy-nilly on passion’s tide? Was it this unconscious comparison that had made me recoil at the very mention of marriage? Or was it that for so long marriage had meant but one person and that person deeply, comfortably known? It was all these things and more. I think even then I guessed I would never be able to totally possess this man who had taken such absolute possession of me, guessed there would always be areas that I couldn’t reach without trespassing dangerously. When I finally took myself inside and up the stairs to fall upon my bed, the cook was already in the kitchen preparing breakfast.

I had hoped my father, after a few hours’ sleep, would see the absurdity of this command appearance he’d arranged at his office. Apparently he didn’t, for when I woke at noon he wasn’t there. I fidgeted, waiting for his return. I could imagine the meeting, or rather my father’s part in it. In the calmer light of day he’d no longer be the irate parent but the man of sensibility, appealing to his opponent’s reason and logic. And Flagg? Would he in the calmer light of day find the night’s airy flight regrettable, my father’s arguments a welcome reprieve? And I knew what those arguments would be. “In many ways my daughter is young for her age . . . the death of her mother, the loss of her fiancé to another . . . she is particularly vulnerable

at this time. . .” Pacing the piazza that overlooked the street, I made up arguments of my own. “I’m almost twenty-two . . . I never felt this way about Stark Bartow or any other man . . . this is for me to decide.” But what were the use of arguments, my father’s or mine? The case rested with Flagg. I strained my eyes up the street for some sign of my father. Eventually he came, walking slowly. It was all that I could do to keep from running down the street to meet him—a child again. “What did you bring me today? A lollipop? A picture book? A man’s heart? Or a shattered illusion?”

He didn’t see me until he’d reached the piazza, was about to go into the house.

“Hello, there. What are you doing out here in the heat of the day?” He sounded cheerful enough. Triumphant? The shadow of the wayward boy from Pritchard’s laid to rest?

“I was waiting for you. Did you have your talk with Flagg?”

“Yes, yes, we had our talk.” He opened the door, held it for me to precede him. “Do you know what that arrogant young ne’er-do-well had the audacity to say?”

I shook my head. I couldn’t speak. Sharply I drew in my breath, held it.

“He said he wants to marry you,” my father said and tossed his hat to the hall table, then, scowling, turned to look at me. “Just what did happen between you two last night?”

“I guess you might say we fell in love,” I said, and because I must do something about this lightness in my heart, this giddyness in my head, I threw my arms around my father and hugged him. “Please say you don’t mind too much!”

“Of course I mind,” he said gruffly. “But I don’t see that there’s much I can do about it. Maybe with you he’ll amount to something, give up this vagabond existence.”

I didn’t say it but I thought, “Never with me. I don’t want him changed. He knows that. It is probably why he loves me. . . .”

I thought of this again on the October day I took my first ride aboard *Miss Pritchard*.

True to his promise, Flagg took me with him on *Miss Pritchard’s* first trial run. I packed cold chicken, hot coffee, a bottle of wine and drove to the boat-works dock to meet him. He’d been there hours before me, greasing the

motor, testing the anchor hoist. He greeted me with a distracted smile, his eyes bright with an excitement that had nothing to do with my presence.

“How do you like the paint job? I’m not too sure that the spark plugs don’t need some work, but they’ll get us out past the lighthouse and back.” He lifted me aboard, held me close a minute. He smelled of motor oil and motor grease. “Welcome aboard,” he said. “Welcome to my future.”

“She is our future, isn’t she?” I drew away from him and looked *Miss Pritchard* over with different eyes. In spite of fresh paint and the new nets she was just an old hulk of a boat with little to recommend her beyond a sturdy hull and a wide, seaworthy stern. I felt Flagg watching me anxiously and turned to meet his eyes. “I know we can depend on her,” I said, but it was not of the boat I was thinking. It was of her captain whose jaw was squarely, firmly set and whose eyes were alight with hope.

Flagg untied the forward mooring and I the stern. *Miss Pritchard* moved noisily out into the bay. There were camp chairs and two hardwood bunks in the cabin, but I preferred to stand beside Flagg at the wheel and watch the roofs and trees of Royal Bay glide backward past us.

“As soon as we pass the channel marker I’ll let you steer,” Flagg said.

“I wouldn’t dare.”

“Nothing to it. All you do is point the prow toward the tip of Buzzard’s Island until we get to the buoy, then you point her out a little to left of Eaton’s Landing. After that you’ve got the lighthouse straight in front of you.”

“You *do* trust me.”

“I just want you to see how easy she handles.”

He was right—she did handle easily. Even when, as we neared the ocean, the ground swells increased. We anchored off Fripp’s Island. We half sat, half sprawled on the deck in the distantly warm October sun and drank wine from a tumbler. “To *Miss Pritchard*,” I drank. “And to her captain!”

“To Lucy, my true love. Long may she believe in us both.” Flagg drained his glass and put it aside. “To Lucy, my sweet, my gentle darling,” he murmured and pulled my head across his knees and bent to kiss my mouth. His hands with their glint of red-gold hair at the knuckles unbuttoned my shirt front, moved across my bared shoulders, drawing me to him. “This is the way it should be,” he said. “Isn’t it, Lucy? Isn’t it?”

Trembling, speechless, I nodded. It might not be the way it should be, but it was the way it had to be. It was the way it was.

## CHAPTER 10

It was late fall when I received my second summons from Mrs. Bartow. I'd not heard from her since that fateful day almost a year past. Nor anything about her except that she still kept to her rooms, mourning her son's marriage. I'd almost forgotten she existed.

This summons was not written on the white linen note paper with its faint scent of lavender or brought to my door and delivered with a servile bow from Ferris, the gardener. This summons came over the telephone from Mrs. Bartow herself. In a voice that spoke in tones hardly above a whisper she asked if I'd received a note from her two weeks ago. When I told her that I hadn't, she said, "Then things are far worse than I'd imagined. I must see you, child. I must see someone and you—— They are going to Charleston in the morning. They will be gone the entire day. Can you come?"

The breathless, nervous note she lent to the word "they," her failure to use Christian names, gave me an uneasy feeling of duplicity. She could not know, of course, of my engagement to Flagg Thorpe. I wore no ring. Our wedding plans were still contingent on getting *Miss Pritchard* paid for, which is to say they were at that time virtually nonexistent. But even had our intentions been made public it is doubtful if the news would have penetrated Mrs. Bartow's self-imposed exile. Had I not been so secure in my own happiness I believe I should have had the wisdom to refuse her request. I would have known at once that no good could come of so clandestine a meeting between two people who no longer had anything in common worth preserving. However, none of this crossed my mind. I thought only of her age, her sadness, her loneliness, and that she had called out to me in her need, whatever it was. I said that I would drive out to Menlo in the morning.

I drove out past Cutler's Corners, left onto the bridge, through the woods and across plowed fields to the gates of Menlo. I was prepared to feel some twinge of regret, some prodding of old wounds as I drove down that avenue again, but I felt only a vague homesickness for my childhood and for those childhood companions who were lost to me. The place had never looked more beautiful. Summer's dying crab grass had been replaced by emerald winter rye; the pittosporum hedges were clipped and shining; the big oaks had been trimmed of some of their moss to let in more light and a wider

view of Coosaw Sound. Everything looked newer than I'd remembered. "Well-tended" was the word that came to mind, and I thought, yes, Gloria would see to that. Not for nothing those paper-doll castles so elaborately arranged in the corner of the kitchen on Palm Street!

A strange maid let me in, took me upstairs to the west wing. We knocked at the paneled door of a room that I'd remembered as being a guest room and waited.

"Her hearing's not so good." The maid knocked again, and in a moment Mrs. Bartow, from the other side of the closed door, said cautiously:

"Who is there?"

"It's I, Lucy Fenwick," I said. I heard the sound of a key being inserted in a lock and glanced at the maid in alarm. "Does she always lock herself in?" I whispered. The maid nodded, shrugged, and in a gesture that was both impudent and illuminating, touched a finger to her head. I began to wish I'd not come, but the moment the door was opened and Mrs. Bartow held her hand out in greeting I forgot my momentary doubts. She looked just as I remembered her, a little frailer perhaps, but still the erect carriage, the delicate air of authority, the impression of beauty where none existed.

"Dear Lucinda, how nice of you to come." Turning to the maid, she directed her to bring up coffee and a pastry, and when the maid had gone she did not lock the door behind her.

The room had been made into a sitting room, and because here were collected all those things Mrs. Bartow most treasured, it revealed more about her than all of Menlo had in the past. A spinet piano in one corner held a music sheet open to a Chopin waltz. I hadn't known she played. I said so. She smiled wistfully. "I studied in Germany for two years. I planned to be a concert pianist. Unfortunately I lacked the stamina." Pictures of Stark as a little boy, as a youth, stared down at me from mantel and bookcases; a picture of Mr. Bartow in hunting clothes occupied the center table.

Perched on the window sill, a bride and groom whom I judged to be Mr. and Mrs. Bartow looked fixedly into each other's eyes. A rag doll with knitted eyes and a crumpled, deserted air sat in a child's chair beside the fireplace. A reminder, I supposed, of the daughter who had played with her. Brushing aside some embroidery and a tract on "Yogi in Western Culture," Mrs. Bartow made room for me on the couch beside her.

"I suppose you wondered how I dared ask you to come here again after all that has happened?" She sighed but did not wait for my reply. "It is

because I cannot live forever, and before I die someone must know what is going on here. I could think of no one whom I could trust. And then I thought of you. I hope you don't mind." Her look was questioning. Mind? That all depended. But what could I say except that I was pleased at this opportunity to see her again.

"And you have no bitterness toward my son?"

"None," I said truthfully.

"Then you are just the one to help me. You will help me, won't you?"

Now I knew was the time to put a stop to her confidences if I possibly could. Firmly I said, "Mrs. Bartow, I don't know what it is that troubles you, but if it has to do with your son, I was no help to you before. I can be of even less help now. You see, I— —"

"I only want you to listen," she interrupted. "That is help enough. Just to know there is someone besides myself aware of the dangers, the perils, that await my son." As she spoke her voice, usually so quietly modulated, rose to a distressing pitch. "Someone who can counsel him if I'm not here to do it." Mrs. Bartow drew back and regarded me through narrowed lids as though to see better the effect of her words on me. I hoped she couldn't see that I thought her quite mad.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," I said.

"That woman my son married does not love him!" Mrs. Bartow drew her lips in in a narrow, forbidding line, daring me to deny it. I saw no point in attempting to.

"Whatever she feels for him," I said, "she makes him happy, I've been told." There was a certain lofty satisfaction in defending her whom I, too, inwardly condemned.

"I suppose you know that he has given her the deed to Menlo."

"I had heard that."

"When she enters the room he turns to water!"

"I had heard that too." Heard and understood, thanks to the fisherman from Pritchard's Island.

"She walks in the garden at night. Alone. She wants no one with her. Will have no one. I have often found him watching her from a window. I can feel his longing to join her, but she says his presence distracts her from the beauty of the place. He gives her her way in all things."

“This is their marriage.” I placed a soothing hand over the frail, agitated one beside me. “You must try to get used to it. You must try to understand.”

“I understand too much.” She pulled her hand free of mine, hardly aware that she did so. “It is this place she loves. Not my son. I’ve seen it in a thousand ways. I’ve seen it in the expression in her eyes when she moves through the house. She wears a look of ecstasy as though in each room she encountered a lover. Yet when my son appears the look vanishes. I have seen her recoil from his touch even while she smiled into his eyes. I have seen a flash of anger in her eyes even while her lips formed pleasant phrases. She despises him because in order to possess Menlo she first had to let him possess her. She despises my son, and I live in mortal dread of the day he discovers it.” She no longer seemed feverish, or even greatly distressed, and her voice uttering that final summation of all her fears was peculiarly toneless.

I tried to think of something comforting to say, but she seemed now in no especial need of comfort, and the maid chose that moment to return with the coffee and pastries. Instead, I used the maid’s presence to change the subject by asking her to tell me more about her music, her years in Germany. I sought to distract her, and I succeeded. In talking about her youth she seemed to regain some indefinable quality of youth. Her eyes lightened; her color improved, and once, telling me of a midnight escapade in the Tyrol, she even laughed aloud. I only wish that were the memory of her I could have carried away with me. But suddenly in the midst of her narrative she broke off, cocked her head to one side, seemed to listen. Automatically I, too, listened. But I heard nothing.

“They are back,” she whispered urgently. “They must have changed their plans. You must go. Quickly. Down the back stairs.” Even as she spoke she was hustling me off the couch, into my coat. Her hands trembled, and her mouth was working strangely.

“This is silly!” I protested. “After all, we’re all adults. Or should be. . . .” For all my brave talk, I found that some of her anxiety had transmitted itself to me, for my hands were shaking almost as much as hers. But still I’d no intention of skulking out like a criminal caught at the scene of the crime. “I shan’t tell them anything if I do see them,” I said, “except to say that I paid you a call, that I had wanted to for a long time and happened to be near and dropped in.”

“No one ever happens to be near Menlo.” She clutched my arm in a clawlike grasp. “They must not see you here. They will know if they do that

I sent for you and why. She will be angry. Now go. And remember what I've said to you today. Remember it well." She virtually shoved me through the door. Behind me I heard the sound of her key turning in the lock.

Never in my life have I felt quite so physically alone as I felt at that moment, poised at the top of the stairway in a house which had grown more than strange to me. Below stairs I could hear unmistakable sounds of life—footsteps, a woman's voice, a door closing—and I wondered how Mrs. Bartow with her deafness had been able to hear what I could not hear until now. I waited until it seemed to me the footsteps and the voice had faded into the far reaches of the house before, mustering all the composure at my command, I started down the stairs. I made the first landing without mishap, the second, the foot of the stairs. My impulse then was to make a dash for the front door, but I fortunately had the sense to realize that should I be seen my unseemly haste would only make matters worse. I passed the closed study door, the open drawing room, and was about to achieve my last hurdle, the parlor door, when Stark walked out of it. I don't think he'd heard me for he looked as startled as I felt. His eyes for a second were totally blank, as though, not believing what they saw, they failed to see anything at all.

"Hi, there," I said, reverting in my confusion to our childhood greeting.

"Why, Lucy!" His slow smile was warm, the hands he held out to me eager in their grasp. "We saw a car in the drive but never dreamed it was you. Why that stupid maid didn't tell us! I suppose she forgot. She has the memory of a flea. Where did she hide you all this time?"

He'd given me an out and foolishly I grasped it. "When I found you and Gloria were away, I visited with your mother awhile." I was too grateful for this glib explanation to give more than fleeting concern to how Stark and Gloria might interpret it.

"You visited with Mother? In her rooms? And she consented to it?" He seemed more pleased than curious, and I nodded.

"That is good news!" he exclaimed. "I can't remember when she last had a caller. Frankly, I've been worried about her. How did she seem to you?"

"She hardly seems to have aged at all," I said.

"That wasn't what I meant exactly, but it'll do. Come now, take off your coat and let me go and find Gloria. Good thing we had engine trouble and had to come back, or we'd have missed you." As he spoke he propelled me into the parlor, insisted on removing my coat. There was nothing for it but to play the deception out, little as I wanted to.

“I can’t stay but a minute,” I murmured.

“Nonsense! Now you’re here you’ll have to stay for lunch. Gloria won’t hear of your doing otherwise.” With a blithe wave he was gone in search of her.

Miserably I sat down and waited their return. The chair on which I sat felt like a quicksand bog sucking me in and down. No retreating now! They were back, Gloria and Stark, in no time. She was wearing riding clothes and derby, and I couldn’t help noticing with a twinge of envy that even in this masculine getup she looked thoroughly female. The fitted trousers showed to advantage her long legs, tapered hip line, and the artless swing of her walk.

“Hello, Lucy.” Her eyes looked directly into mine, and try as I might, I could find nothing in their look to remind me of anything at all. Nothing of friendship. Nothing of enmity. I remembered what Susan Smythe had written, “She greeted everyone as though she’d never met any of us before.” Looking into those wide, impersonal eyes, I had the eerie sensation that those afternoons on Palm Street, the hours in Marty’s ice-cream parlor, even that last bitter scene on the post-office steps had nothing whatsoever to do with this beautiful creature who stood, her arm linked in her husband’s, waiting for me to speak.

“I see that you planned to go riding,” I said. “You mustn’t let me hold you up. It’s late, and I must be getting back. I’m only glad I didn’t miss you altogether.” The lie made glue of my tongue.

“I can ride any time. Surely you didn’t come all the way out here just to turn around and go back?” The eyes were still expressionless.

“Of course she didn’t,” Stark said. “She’s going to stay for lunch. I’ll go and tell cook.”

Before either of us could stop him, and I think Gloria was as anxious to as I, he had gone. We listened in awkward silence to his retreating footsteps, and when they had quite died away Gloria said, “I suppose your curiosity got the better of pride?”

How I burned to deny this! Only the memory of the lonely, frightened old lady upstairs restrained me. “If you want to put it that way . . .” I gathered my coat up from the chair where Stark had put it. Nothing and no one could induce me to stay for one moment more than I had to.

“Why the hurry?” Gloria sank down on the sofa. “I’m perfectly willing to let bygones be bygones, given half a chance.” She gave me a sidewise questioning look, and suddenly she smiled. How could I have forgotten the

radiant mischief of that smile, the disarming inclusiveness? “I’ve so much to tell you, Lucy. Please stop being so uppity and cross about things. Did you know that Menlo belongs to me? Can you believe it? Mine! Wouldn’t Pop be proud?”

Mutely I nodded, struggling against the impact of her charm.

“But, oh, the things you don’t know . . . I’ve a horse named Star. A perfect beauty out of the Sandpit stables in Virginia. And I’ve a Russian wolfhound. I think they’re so distinguished, don’t you? And, Lucy, roses in my room, fresh every day, yellow when it rains, red on sunny days . . . would you like to see my room? It’s the only one I’ve done over. The rest I want left as is because that is how I remembered it.” She was off the sofa and across the room. I had no choice but to follow her, nor did I really want one. Disarmed by her enthusiasm, the rancor that time and events had placed on me seemed to be slipping away.

Only as we passed Mrs. Bartow’s closed door did I feel a twinge of compunction. Unconsciously I must have slowed my pace, for ahead of me Gloria stopped and waited for me to catch up with her. A toss of her head indicated the closed door. “She simply loathes me,” she whispered. “Not that I care. But it isn’t easy, I can tell you, having her skulking after me, spying on everything I do. I just don’t let myself think about it. Life is too short.”

The room that Gloria had chosen to make hers was, I found, the bedroom in the east wing that had once been the master bedroom. I recognized it because of its breathtaking view. There was little of Menlo that couldn’t be seen from one or another of its many-paned windows. There recognition ceased. It was now clearly a woman’s room. Pink wallpaper, gold carpeting almost ankle deep, flounced organdy curtains, a rosebud spread and canopy on the four-poster bed attested to that. The dressing table was almost as long as the bed itself, and never, outside of a New York department store, had I beheld such an array of crystal bottles, silver containers, beads and bangles, powders and creams as covered it. “Altar to beauty,” I murmured, and behind me Gloria laughed delightedly.

“Isn’t it all just too marvy? I still pinch myself!” She moved across the room and flung open double doors, revealing a closet bursting with clothes. “Twenty pairs of shoes I’ve got, Lucy. And dresses I’ve never even worn.” Her eyes shone with the old fairy-tale light. “Your mother would have loved all this,” I said heedlessly. Gloria’s eyes clouded, and for a moment her mouth drooped, but only for a moment. A toss of her head and whatever unhappy thoughts I’d conjured were flung aside.

“She made her choice. She chose Mr. Green. I told her if she’d only wait, only be patient . . .” Suddenly, as though she was afraid she’d said too much, she broke off. “Look, Lucy, my very own radio. Right beside my bed.” She flicked the switch, and a static-fuzzed voice told us we could expect rain on the morrow.

Idly I wondered if Stark shared this pink and gold bower. If he did, he left no trace. I thought of the nights I lay dreaming of the room Flagg and I would some day share. A room as yet without shape or color, because I never got past the intoxicating vision of a red-gold head on the pillow next to mine. “I too am getting married,” I said to Gloria, surprised that I could make so prosaic a statement out of so acute a joy. Gloria, fussing with the radio dials, didn’t appear to hear me. “We don’t know exactly when, so we aren’t telling many people. His name is Flagg, Flagg Thorpe. He was a few grades ahead of us in school. Maybe you remember him.”

“Flagg Thorpe?” Gloria turned to look at me with astonished disbelief. “Not that wild redhead from Pritchard’s? Why, Lucy, you must be out of your mind.”

“I am,” I said happily. “Completely out of my mind.”

“But, Lucy . . .” She began to laugh. “You of all people,” she said between spasms, “the proper, protected Lucinda Fenwick in love with a scallywag fisherman. And you must be in love with him, otherwise . . . oh, oh, oh.” She was overcome with laughter again. “Even you must see the joke of it.” She gasped and with a terrible effort stopped the laughter. Whether it was the natural contortion of a face adjusting to repose I don’t know, but the moment her merriment subsided she appeared, all at once, to be almost on the point of tears. “Even you must see the joke of it,” she repeated.

“I’m afraid I don’t,” I said.

“You, the lady, marrying the river rat while I . . . well, I should think Royal Bay would get as much of a shock out of it as they did when I married the Prince of Menlo.”

“Perhaps,” I conceded, “but Flagg isn’t nearly as wild as you make him out. In fact, he isn’t wild at all when you know him. He’s— —”

“Now don’t look so hurt. I probably did exaggerate. And I will say this for him. He’s the only man could ever send shivers down my spine just by looking at me. There! Does that make you feel better? Come”—she whirled about—“Stark will think we’re dead and buried. And lunch will be cold.”

We found Stark waiting for us in the “morning room,” the name given to the smaller of the two dining rooms. Gloria went straight to him and planted a wifely kiss on his chin. So much, I thought, for Mrs. Bartow’s dire observations.

“Lucy has some exciting news for us.”

“Oh?” He glanced, smiling, in my direction, but his look was not long for me. He seemed, quite literally, unable to take his eyes off his wife.

“Tell him, Lucy.” Gloria too was different from the “upstairs” Gloria. Quiet, subdued, every gesture executed with a conscious grace.

“I’m going to be married,” I told Stark. “Flagg Thorpe and I . . .”

“Flagg Thorpe? Splendid fellow!” Stark said. “Capable too. A good head on his shoulders. I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if he didn’t make quite a thing of this shrimping business, given time.”

I looked at Gloria, expecting her to argue the point, but she was smiling complacently into her bouillon. “I only hope you’ll be half as happy as we are,” she said, and across the table Stark reached for her hand.

Lunch over, Gloria went off for her postponed ride, and Stark walked with me out to my car. Just as Gloria had seemed to change in his presence, so Stark, without her, was once again the youth I remembered.

“Well, Lucy”—he grinned down at me—“all’s well that ends well. I can’t tell you how glad I am for you. You know, I should have guessed. You look different. Less pixie, more woman. Are you still a Brontë fan?”

“I’ve graduated to Maugham.”

“Too brittle. Have you read anything by that fellow Faulkner?”

“I’ve tried to. He depresses me.”

Mr. Ferris came out of the greenhouse and with his fishing rod ambled down toward the sound.

“He still here?” I was surprised. Stark always used to say that the first thing he’d do when he owned Menlo was to fire that ogre of his youth.

“Yes.” He sighed. “Gloria sets great store by him. Says he’s the only one that can teach her how to take care of the lawns and gardens. Gloria loves the place, you know, almost as much as I, and Ferris is her willing slave. Poor devil, I think he’s half in love with her himself on a worshipful, the-queen-can-do-no-wrong, basis. He’s pitiful in a way. Gloria had the audacity

to ask him how it was he'd minded so much having Menlo belong to me and didn't seem to mind at all now that it was hers. He told her it was because she was the sort of lady he would have wanted to give Menlo to himself had it been his to give. So you see, I'll have to put up with him. It's not easy. Mother has taken a dislike to him and hounds me to be rid of him. She's got some idea that since Gloria's made such a pet of him he thinks he owns the place. But then Mother is full of ideas these days. Part of growing old, I expect." His questioning look begged me to agree.

"Perhaps," I said. "It's too bad you can't persuade her to share more in your life."

"The truth is, I'm afraid that Father's death unhinged her a bit. At least that's when it all started. It's a shame really. Gloria could do so much for her if she'd only let her, but she's shut herself away from all of us."

"Even you?"

"In a sense."

"How does she feel about Gloria?" I wondered if he could be unaware of the cauldron of hate and fear that bubbled and brewed beneath his very eyes.

"I don't know, and frankly"—he flushed angrily—"I don't care. She didn't want me to marry her. Thought I was marrying beneath me. Beneath me! And Gloria with more character in her little finger than any colorless, simpering debutante I ever met at college. Naturally I wish they could be friends. And naturally I worry about it, but . . ." He shrugged. "God knows we can't have everything."

"And you seem to have much!" I hastened to add. I meant it. I felt immensely reassured. If Gloria didn't love him, she had at least managed to keep him from knowing it. He was on that day the picture of contentment.

I little dreamed that it would be Flagg and I, my love for Flagg, that would eventually rend the blinders from his heart.

## CHAPTER 11

I didn't tell Flagg the complete story of my day at Menlo. He scarcely knew either Mrs. Bartow or Gloria, and to have told him about Mrs. Bartow's sending for me and her reasons for doing so would have meant telling him the entire history of my relationship with Menlo and with Gloria. He knew, of course, of my friendship with Stark and guessed that I had been wounded by his marriage, but I'd never spoken of Gloria's part in it and saw even less reason to go into it now. I simply said that I'd been out to Menlo that day without giving any reason why. Had he asked or even shown any particular astonishment, I'd have told him more, but he seemed only mildly interested. He wanted to know if marriage had had a softening effect on "old stiff-back," as he affectionately called Stark, and if I'd had any qualms about seeing him again. Satisfied on both counts, he'd dropped the subject in favor of one far more absorbing to us both, *Miss Pritchard's* future and our own, one and the same. In a few weeks he was taking her down off the Florida coast for a few months. Our waters are too cold in winter for shrimp. Much as I hated the separation, we planned, if his Florida catch was good, to be married the following summer.

As it turned out, he returned from Florida the last day of February, and we were married in King Charles Chapel on the second day of March.

In Flagg's absence Miss Berry, who for thirty-five years had edited the woman's page of the Royal Bay weekly, died and audaciously I applied for the job. It paid a mere pittance, but it was money, and Flagg had had an excellent season in Florida, better even than we'd hoped for. The months of separation had been unendurable to both of us, and in the heightened passion of reunion we decided to throw practicality to the winds. My father was surprisingly co-operative. He probably guessed that I'd reached the end of virtue's tether. At any rate, he hired a housekeeper and staked us to six months' rent of an apartment in the converted basement of the Faye house on High Street.

The apartment was furnished, I'm sure, out of the Faye attic. Dorothea Faye, who considered herself the more creative of the two spinster sisters, had "done it over" herself and took enormous pride in the horsehair sofa, the lumpy four-poster bed, the drop-leaf table that dropped leaf all by itself at the worst possible times, and the white marble cupid that clearly belonged in

the garden and certainly not on the mantel in the bedroom where she'd coyly placed it, prompted by heaven knows what spinsterish notions of connubial bliss. . . . The apartment consisted of three rooms and bath. It was cold in winter, hot in summer, and, due to the large Faye piazzas which hung over it, got very little light. I cooked on a three-burner kerosene stove, and we bathed in a huge tin tub that sometimes ran hot, sometimes cold, but never both, and seemed to lead a secret life all its own. There were times when we turned the faucets on and no water came and others when, with no one anywhere near, it would spew forth torrents to be lost down the drain. Because of some odd arrangements in the heating system we soon discovered that any sound above a whisper made in the living room was carried straight upstairs to the Fayes' parlor. In spite of all its handicaps no other place we've lived in glows so richly in my memory. Though shadowed by piazzas, the windows looked out on the Faye garden. Like the sisters themselves, it was blowsy, colorful, and robust. Palmetto and live oak thrived side by side, and beneath them in winter pyracantha and nandina bushes flaunted their myriad red berries. In the spring the garden was aflame with pink and white azalea and in summer the less ethereal oleander. In the winter we went to Pritchard's and brought wood home in the pickup truck. Enough to keep the fire burning in the big stone fireplace all day and far into the night. That fireplace was the center of our social life. We couldn't afford to go out, or to entertain, that first year. In Florida, Flagg had swapped a hundred pounds of shrimp for a victrola that worked by crank and a dozen or so records, as old and tinny as the victrola itself—Caruso, Kreisler, Sousa's band, thin and scratchy—but we thought them beautiful.

Sometimes Miriam and Bill Tolles, the young lawyer she'd married, or Susan and Tommy Smythe, or Laurie Piper and her beau of the moment, would stop by to share a bowl of popcorn and a mug of the home-brew Flagg had learned to make as a boy. More often we were alone. And preferred to be. We would take the sofa cushions over to the fireplace, crank up the victrola, and with this somewhat archaic music as background we would talk or make quiet, untroubled love, depending on our mood. We had much to learn about each other. Some of these things were revealed to us in those long solitary hours before the fire; others we could only learn outside the protective periphery of intimacy and in time. For instance, nothing in our relationship then or later could have told me that Flagg was possessed of a fierce and frightening temper. I had to witness the meeting between him and the man who'd tried to steal the rudder off *Miss Pritchard* to learn of this. Though the man was twice his size, Flagg tossed him half the length of the Portuguese's wharf. And I saw Flagg's face afterward. It was not a face that

I recognized or wanted to. There was cruelty there. I was at first frightened. Later, perversely, hurt, that there should be a so intensely important part of him kept hidden from me.

I was to learn there was much about him that I would never understand. The black moods that only solitude and a boat's prow slapping through the waves could cure. The drive that was not so much ambition as it was love of the sea and pride. The drive that took him out at dawn, brought him back at night, haggard but undismayed by a poor day's catch or the books I kept for him which no amount of juggling brought into the black.

Shortly after we were married and at the height of the shrimping season *Miss Pritchard* sprung a bad leak and had to go into dry dock. This meant that every day until she should be afloat again we would be losing money. For a week Flagg fretted and fumed around the house. At the end of the week when I came home from my job at the paper he told me that he'd signed up with the Portuguese to ship aboard his trawler at deck-hand wages. If it was work he wanted, he could pick up twice the salary surveying for the telephone company or working for the tomato packers. I thought his scheme senseless and said so. He heard me out, his jaw set, his eyes looking past and through me.

"I'm sorry, Lucy, but I've already told Sebasto. He's counting on me. We leave at four in the morning. I'll need clean dungarees. Are there any in the drawer?" He started into the bedroom.

"Sebasto can find someone else. The town is full of high-school boys who'd jump at the chance. Dave Smythe was saying just the other day — —"

"I've got to go," Flagg interrupted. "Don't you understand that?"

"No, I don't. I think it's crazy. Demeaning besides. You working as a deck hand for Sebasto!"

"So it's the prissy judge's daughter speaking!" He strode off to the bedroom. I heard the bureau drawer slam open, bang closed. I flew to the bedroom door.

"Prissy, am I? Then why did you ever marry me?"

"Because I love you and you know it!" He glared at my reflection in the bureau mirror. "But don't try to pin me down or hold me back when I want out. Maybe it looks crazy to you, but I've got to go, Lucy. I'd go nuts surveying. I'd go nuts in a packing house. I'd go nuts around this house in another day. It's nothing to do with you. It's to do with me."

He went, of course, and when he returned he was serene and clear-eyed. He held me close and hard and kissed my hair and eyes and called me his beloved. We sat late over the kitchen table cleaning the fish he'd brought and talking.

"I've decided one thing," he said excitedly. "One boat isn't enough in this business. In a bad season you need all the boats you can get. In a good one, why be limited? The only future in any business is expansion. Expansion!" He leaned back, eyes narrowed, fixed on the ceiling. "I've always dreamed of a fleet of boats, enough to cover the waters from the Gulf to Cape Hatteras."

As he talked I could almost see them, those trawlers with their wide, purposeful hulls, their high, looped nets, sailing in formation out to sea. I agreed dreamily that expansion was the only answer. I hardly imagined that before the sun had set again he'd have mortgaged half of *Miss Pritchard* and borrowed enough money more to purchase *The Gull*.

Though *Miss Pritchard* would always be Flagg's first love, she was forever ailing. Like some high-strung accident-prone woman she couldn't, with all the love and care in the world, seem to stay out of trouble. She sprang leaks, got her net poles cracked in a storm, lost anchor at sea. But *The Gull* brought us luck from the start. *The Gull*, albeit twice her age and not a whit more seaworthy, seemed blessedly invulnerable to the vicissitudes of time and tide. Not only that, she seemed to attract the shrimp. Even where there were none. Flagg had had her scarcely six months when he was able to repay the mortgage he'd taken out on *Miss Pritchard* and a portion of the loan. Flushed with triumph, we decided to give a party. A very small party. Just Miriam and Bill Tolles, Susan and Tommy Smythe, Laurie Piper and Carl Beard. Flagg scowled thoughtfully over the list. Quick to respond to his unspoken censure, I said:

"I could leave out Laurie and her beau."

"I was just thinking we should ask Stark Bartow and his wife. Do you think you could stretch the spaghetti that far?"

"Stark and Gloria?" I was puzzled. I'd not seen either of them since we were married. They'd sent a wedding present, a silver something meant to hold things. I'd written a note in thanks and later heard they'd gone to Scotland to look at bulls. "Why do you especially want them?"

"I don't know. It was just an idea. I see him now and then at Chamber of Commerce meetings. And it was he, you know, who signed the note for me

so I could buy *The Gull*. Thought he'd like to help celebrate his good judgment."

"Stark Bartow loaned you money?" Why this should seem so dire a humiliation I don't know.

"He didn't lend it. The bank did. He simply signed the note. I thought I told you."

"Did you ask him to sign it?"

"Of course I did," Flagg said impatiently. "What's the crisis? Stark knew if nip came to tuck I'd stand behind it. It's just a formality. A bank rule."

"But why Stark? Didn't you know that he and I . . . that we—"

"Of course I knew," Flagg interrupted angrily. "What's that got to do with it? Or are you trying to tell me you still carry a torch? . . ."

"You know that's not so." I was now as angry as he.

"Then I'll thank you to keep your old romances out of my business transactions."

"Have you no pride?"

"That does it!" Flagg said and turned on his heel and, though it was almost midnight, went out of the apartment, slamming the door behind him.

He'd hardly been gone five minutes before I realized how unreasonable I'd been. But I couldn't tell him that it wasn't Stark's help I really minded. It was the idea of Gloria's husband being asked to help mine. And how could I ever expect Flagg to understand that? I threw myself across the bed and wept. I knew there was only one thing to do and presently, when I'd dried my eyes, I wrote a note to Gloria and Stark, inviting them.

I sealed and stamped it and, feeling chastened and humble, I went out into the Fayes' garden looking for Flagg. The moon was new. I had to depend on the slivers of light descending from the Fayes' shuttered windows. He wasn't on the bench where often we sat of a hot summer evening or anywhere that I could see in the front garden. I walked around to the back of the house, softly calling his name, but all I got for answer was the whish-swish of the breeze in the palmetto trees above me. I felt suddenly bereft and achingly lonely. I ran to the front of the house and down the path to the gate where our car was usually parked. The car was gone. I leaned on the gatepost and wept tears of frustration and remorse. It was not the first time he'd left me to find solace aboard *Miss Pritchard*, but it was the first

time I, and not his own mood, had driven him to it. It was the first time he'd not told me of his going. It seemed terribly important that I see him before the wound I'd inflicted had bled too grievously. The pickup truck was there, smelling horribly of old shrimp. I'd never driven it, but anything seemed at that moment better than waiting. The wheel was stiff and the road out to Eaton's Landing where Flagg had built the dock and loading shed was dark and rutted. I dared not contemplate the possibility that he'd put out to sea. It was heavenly relief to finally see the dim outline of *Miss Pritchard's* hefty hull and net masts at the water's edge. I ran down the dock, the light from the kerosene lamp that burned in her cabin pointing the way. Flagg, hearing me, came to the cabin door. His eyes, probing the outer darkness, were stern and wary.

"Who's there?" It was a command. I stopped in my tracks, startled by the fierceness of his voice.

"It is I, Lucy," I said weakly.

At once he smiled sheepishly, walked to the boat's edge, held up his arms to help me to the deck. "Did I frighten you? I'm sorry. It's that you never know . . ."

"I came to tell you I am sorry," I said. "I was stupid. Unfair." He set me down and drew me into the cabin. A pot of coffee bubbled on the Bunsen burner. The light from the kerosene lamp that swung overhead was soft, rosy yellow. He went to the coffeepot, removed the lid, peered inside.

"Almost done," he said. "Would you like a cup?"

I'd never seen him like this before, indifferent, remote, but then I'd never hurt him before. "Say that you forgive me, Flagg. That you're not angry with me. I've written a note to Stark and Gloria inviting them," I added hastily. "I was wrong not to do it the minute you asked."

"Is that what you came all the way out here to tell me?" Suddenly he smiled, scooped me into his arms. "You can go home and tear the invitation up for all I really care," he said, "only don't go for a while." He tilted my head and kissed my mouth, slowly, lingeringly. "I like having you aboard," he said. "I always have. I always will."

We drank the steaming coffee sitting cross-legged on the bunk and afterward gutted the lamp and lay on the hard board bunk listening to the plosh of wavelets against the hull.

"I've never really known how you felt about old stiff-back," Flagg said presently. "I never wanted to know. All that mattered was how you felt about

me.”

“I was awfully fond of him,” I said, “but it was nothing like this, nothing like this at all.” My head on his shoulder, I traced with my finger tips the stubble jaw, the smooth, hard neckline down to where my fingers became entangled in the crisp, curling hair blanketing his chest.

“And what is this like?” In the dark I could only guess at his smile, slow, contented, knowing full well what my answer would be.

“Like nothing on earth,” I mused. “I wonder that even poets think they can describe it, much less all the others who try.”

“You know, don’t you, that Stark would have made you a far better husband?”

“Impossible!” I laughed.

“Not that I care, but he would have been kinder, more of a companion to you. It worries me sometimes.”

“That Stark didn’t marry me?”

“No, silly, that I’m such a rough diamond, while you . . .”

“But with me you’re not. You’re as gentle as gentle . . .”

“I try to be,” Flagg said solemnly.

We stayed the night aboard *Miss Pritchard* and the next morning, like clandestine lovers, sneaked back to town in our rumpled clothes, hoping the Faye sisters would not yet be up.

I don’t know why the addition of Gloria and Stark’s names to the guest list should have thrown me into such a dither of uncertainty, but it did. What, I asked myself, would the Bartows find in common with the Tolleses, the Smythes, with, for that matter, the Thorpes? My first concession was to change the menu. I pored over cookbooks looking for a recipe as inexpensive as spaghetti and twice as glamorous. My second concession was to break open the piggy bank in order to fill the apartment with flowers.

“Why all the fuss?” Flagg protested. “You’ve known those two longer and better than the others. What are you trying to prove?”

“I don’t know,” I said truthfully. “I only know I’ve got hostess nerves, and I didn’t before they were asked.”

“I see,” Flagg said thoughtfully, and apparently he did, because he took the beer we’d planned to serve back and turned it in for sparkling burgundy.

Miriam and her Bill were the first to come, Stark and Gloria the last. I was glad of this for by then the wine had made me gay and confident. What cared I that I'd forgotten the strawberries and failed to polish the silver? My hair was as soft and shining as a halo—Flagg had told me so—and my nose was the pertest he'd ever seen; he'd told me that too.

Gloria was wearing a very simple dress, very plain, but it was red and it fitted like a sheath, and above it her eyes glinted and shone and her mouth and cheeks seemed as red as the dress she wore. Appreciation was reflected in the eyes of the men, envy in the inaudible sighs of the women.

It was difficult to connect this vivid, lovely creature with the little girl who'd come to my birthday party in the outrageous organdy her mother had sat up all night contriving for her. Or was it? Her quick, furtive appraisal of my backless white linen, of Miriam's full-skirted black cotton, showed me that in spite of her seeming poise there still lurked something of the old Glory, unsure, secretly yearning to be one of us, willing to die rather than admit it. Whatever conclusions Gloria drew from her comparisons must have satisfied her, for she seemed all at once at ease. Laurie, Sue, and Carl had been in the midst of arguing the pros and cons of women in politics when interrupted by the Bartows' arrival. But the moment they could politely return to the subject they did, and Gloria leaped into the fray, defending Carl's point of view. Women, she said, were too emotional to be trusted with affairs of government! Stark followed me out to the kitchen where I rolled out dough for biscuits.

"I can't quite assimilate this apartment of yours," he said. "Of course, you know it's all in the worst possible taste. But there's a quality, a certain something that I can't quite put my finger on that makes me like it."

"It's the flowers." I smiled and gave him a knife and lettuce to cut into a bowl.

"No"—he shook his head wonderingly—"it's more than that. All that heavy, dark furniture, and still there's a lightness, a warmth . . . Perhaps Gloria and I should do over Menlo. Put our own touch to things. Maybe that's the answer."

"Gloria loves Menlo just as it is," I said.

"I used to," he mused. "It's only lately that I've noticed or rather felt a coldness about the place, an austerity. . . . But then, what could be more austere than Miss Faye's horsehair sofa and those Victorian chairs?" He broke off and smiled. "Whatever you've got here, I like it. I hope you'll have us often. I hadn't realized how few friends I had in Royal Bay . . . all

those years away at school . . . I'm afraid Gloria gets lonely. I'm busy most of the day, and nights I've fallen back into the habit of reading." He gave me a rueful glance. "It's the hardest habit in the world to break, I find."

"I don't even try to," I said.

"What's keeping you so long?" Flagg came up behind me and planted a kiss on the nape of my neck and, as I turned, another on my mouth. I saw that Gloria stood in the doorway and that she and Stark were watching us. Stark looked wistful, Gloria cross. Embarrassed by their intrusion, I drew away from Flagg.

"Don't let us interrupt you," Gloria said. "After all, we're practically newlyweds ourselves."

Stark, looking intensely uncomfortable, said nothing.

After everyone had gone Flagg and I, over a monumental pile of dirty dishes, held a post-mortem on the party.

"I think everyone had a good time," I said.

"They certainly ate enough."

"And drank enough! Do you think Bill Tolles should have sung that ballad? Some of the girls looked shocked."

"They had to. It's the way nice girls are supposed to look."

"But even Stark seemed disapproving."

"He was thinking about the nice girls and the way they looked. Chivalrous, that's old stiff-back. Gloria ate it up—the ballad, that is—until she caught Sue's eye on her. That put a stop to it. Too bad, she has a pretty laugh."

"What do you think of them, the two of them, Stark and Gloria?"

"As a pair?"

"As lovers."

"You've got me there."

"It's not the sort of thing a man would think about, I suppose."

"Not in pairs." Flagg grinned. "Did I ever tell you I took Gloria out once long ago when we were in high school?"

"No! Nor did she. And in those days she told me almost everything."

“Probably she was ashamed to. I wasn’t considered fit company in those days if you’ll remember. With reason. I had some crazy ideas about girls. Gloria was one that looked like a really big time.” He laughed, shook his head. “Was I ever wrong! I got my face slapped. I felt bad about it afterward. She ran into the house, bawling like a baby.”

“Didn’t you ever tell her you were sorry?”

“I will some day.” Flagg put down the dishcloth he was using and pulled me to him. “I was proud of you tonight. You looked so pretty and unruffled making everyone comfortable and happy. I felt awfully married to you. I still do,” he said and, reaching above my head, turned off the kitchen light.

Long after Flagg slept I lay awake thinking about the party, thinking about Gloria—Gloria who had slapped the face of the wild creek boy who thought he could have his way with her. I smiled to myself, indulgent toward them both. I smiled and then I remembered Gloria when I’d told her of my engagement to Flagg—the mirthless laughter. “He’s the only man could ever send shivers down my spine just by looking at me. Does that make you feel better?” At the time it had. Now I was no longer so sure.

## CHAPTER 12

I feel sure that even without our party to bring us all together the Bartows would have eventually become a part of the young married group who were our friends. For that is what Gloria wanted, acceptance by those who, worse than snubbing her, had scarcely known of her existence before her marriage. I had naïvely thought that she would employ the Bartow millions and the Bartow position to try her wings in more glamorous circles—New York, Paris, London. Stark had friends in all these places; her beauty would have done the rest. But as the summer wore on it became evident to me that the only kingdom Gloria wished to conquer lay right here in Royal Bay. She seemed perfectly content with oyster roasts at Pritchard's, moonlight rides aboard *The Gull*, a picnic at the beach, an evening of bridge at the Tolleses', a song fest at the Smythes'. It has occurred to me, looking back, that she might have been already half in love with my husband and that this explained her satisfaction with our simple diversions. Yet I think I now know the moment almost when she first awakened to a yearning for love, and that moment did not come until the summer was almost spent. It came near the end of August, and though I witnessed whatever there was to witness, none of us but Gloria could know what had actually taken place. And she not immediately and at once.

The offices of the *Ledger* that day had been steaming hot, the noise from the presses acting as a dentist's drill on my heat-shattered nerves. I plodded through my weekly book review and a wedding rewrite and staggered home.

The apartment was little improvement. The hot and humid air had had its way with the walls. They sweated moisture and splotches of green mold spotted the ceiling. Flagg came in at six to find me sitting disconsolately in my slip in front of the fan.

"This," he said, mopping his brow, "will never do. Sit tight and I'll roll us up a sandwich. The beach is the only place on a night like this."

I fixed a thermos of lemonade while he made the sandwiches. We were almost finished when the telephone rang. I answered it. It was Stark. He and Gloria had had the same idea we'd had. They were going to the beach. Wouldn't we like to come? It was the last thing I wanted. People that would have to be talked to. Any effort seem insurmountably burdensome. I felt it had been months since Flagg and I had been anywhere, done anything,

alone. I almost burst into tears, but what could I tell him? My reluctance was impersonal. The heat. The day. It had nothing to do with them really. Stark said he'd pick us up in half an hour. Flagg was as disappointed as I at this change of plan. "Maybe we can shake them for a while after supper," he said, and we did. We went for a walk up the beach alone together.

The moon was almost full. The incoming tide had brought with it a breeze. We held hands and walked close to the water's edge. Presently we took our sandals off and waded, kicking up phosphorous sparklets with our feet. Suddenly, wordlessly, Flagg picked me up in his arms and carried me across the beach to the edge of the dunes. He made a marsh pillow for my head and lay down beside me. It was there, I am sure, on that sandy moonlit bed that Sarah was conceived.

We dressed slowly, pausing now and then to smile, to kiss, to savor the night around us. We served each other as mirror, brushing off the telltale sand, smoothing our ruffled hair. Still the look of lovers must have clung to us. This is the only way to explain it. Stark and Gloria, when we returned, sat on either side of a little fire they'd made with driftwood and dry dune grass. The faces they turned to greet us were smiling, but as we moved into the light from the fire their smiles faded. They were both looking at me, wonderingly at first, then Gloria's eyes narrowed in the way they had when she was annoyed or resentful and furtively she glanced at Stark. He too appeared strangely disturbed by the look of me. His eyes darkened; his mouth twisted in a smile that was not pleasant to see, and slowly his eyes moved from my face to Gloria's. He looked at her long and hard until her eyes dropped, and she flushed crimson red and angry, and then abruptly he stood up and stamped out the fire. It happened so quickly, was so incomprehensible to Flagg and myself that whatever cheery explanation we'd been prepared to make for our long absence died on our lips. I began quickly to gather up the picnic basket and thermos. Stark strode ahead to the car. Flagg, under pretense of helping me close the hamper, grinning, whispered, "I think they suspect us."

The ride home was a somber one. Stark at the wheel exuded silence. Gloria, sitting beside him, managed, legs curled under her, her body twisted so that her arms rested along the top of the back seat, to seem to be with us rather than with him. She talked in a high, animated voice about the progress she was making teaching her horse to jump; she talked about Mr. Ferris's experiments with crossbreeding orchids; she talked about the importance of knowing which orchids would combine with which, but no matter how long or how loud she talked, she failed to drown out the silence of the man beside

her. When we got to town, the inside of the car was occasionally illumined by street lights, and I saw that angry color still stained her cheeks and that her eyes reflected little interest in what she was saying.

Stark, as though to make amends, got out at our apartment and walked with us to the door. “Beautiful night. We’ll have to do this again,” he said stiffly.

“Next time you and Gloria should try a walk up the beach,” Flagg replied amiably.

“Quite,” Stark muttered, and abruptly turned and walked quickly back to the car.

“You shouldn’t have said that,” I remonstrated the moment we were inside.

“He shouldn’t have made everyone so damned uncomfortable! What’s the matter with him? You’d have thought we were a couple of high-school kids who’d sneaked away from the chaperone!”

“Oh no,” I protested, “you’ve got it all wrong. He wasn’t cross with us; he was angry with Gloria because of us. Maybe hurt is a better word. Hurt because of the way we looked . . . glowing and happy and not able to hide it even if we’d wanted to.”

“If he’d used the time we were gone to better advantage he could have looked glowing and happy too.” Flagg pulled off his shoes, tossed his shirt at the back of the chair, missed, left it lie.

“That’s just the point, you see. I don’t think he has ever seen Gloria glow. I don’t think he knew, until tonight, what a woman in love can look like when she’s been loved. Tonight he saw. I don’t blame him for being angry.” I pulled my nightgown over my head and sat in front of the mirror to comb my hair. In the mirror wide, luminous eyes looked serenely, knowingly, back at me, my mouth seemed to hold a memory of kisses, and even my skin had a radiance that was not its own. No wonder Stark . . . poor Stark . . . and Gloria too . . .

“Maybe what he needs is a book on how to make a wife glow.” Flagg yawned.

“It’s not as simple as that. Gloria doesn’t love him. She never has.”

“She married him.” Flagg’s mirrored reflection got into bed.

“She loves Menlo. She set her heart on it long ago when she was only a child. Stark is incidental, a means to an end.”

“That makes sense,” Flagg mused sleepily. “Stark is a fine man, a gentleman and a scholar, all that, but I never did understand why a girl like Gloria . . . poor kid, what a waste!”

“Poor Gloria?” I whirled about. “You mean poor Stark. I can’t bear to imagine what he’s thinking tonight . . . feeling . . . She has just what she always wanted, but he . . .”

“Do you really think so?” From the bed Flagg cocked an amused eyebrow at me. “Honey, that girl was made for love. I don’t think she knows it yet but God help her when she finds it out.”

“You don’t know her as I do,” I said crossly. “She’ll never put anything ahead of Menlo.”

“Maybe not,” Flagg said. “Put out the light and come to bed. I’m lonely.”

“I’m not,” I said, curling in beside him. “I’m never lonely any more.” Drifting off to sleep in the curve of his arm, Gloria, Stark, Menlo, and what it had done to them and still might do seemed far away and unimportant. Another world. I determined to keep it that way.

I reckoned without Mrs. Bartow.

She telephoned me the very next day. I hardly recognized the whispering voice at the other end of the line, nor did she enlighten me. It was what she was saying that made me know who the voice belonged to.

“I am so frightened, Lucy. Last night they had a quarrel. They’ve never quarreled before. I couldn’t help hearing. It was dreadful. I was afraid Stark would kill her. I’m still afraid. . . . Can’t you talk to him, reason . . . tell him to give her what she wants, anything, and let her go before he does something . . .” Suddenly the whispered anguish broke off on a startled note. The receiver clicked shut in my ear.

It was dusk when she’d called, a sultry, eerie dusk. Slowly I put down the telephone. The darkening yellow light outside combined with the whispered, frightened voice sent shivers of apprehension down my spine. “She’s really quite mad,” I told myself. I walked to the door and looked for some sign of Flagg’s pickup truck, but the street was empty. I turned on the victrola. I turned on a light though the sun had not yet set. When Flagg finally came whistling in, I rushed to him and hugged him tight, but I did not

tell him about the telephone call. Now that he was here, making the apartment cozy and gay, I did not want to talk about it. Gloria and Stark must work out their own destiny, Mrs. Bartow too. It was not fair of her to drag me into it. Besides, Flagg was bursting with news of his own. The Portuguese wanted to retire and had given Flagg a year's option to buy his boat.

"By then," Flagg said exuberantly, "we'll have *The Gull* paid for if our luck holds. Three boats, Lucy! Almost a fleet."

I heard no more from Mrs. Bartow. Nor did I see Gloria or Stark in the weeks following that disturbing telephone call. I tried to forget it. I'd almost succeeded when one morning my father, who had dropped in for coffee on his way to his office, told me that Mrs. Bartow the day before had been committed to a private institution in Columbia for the emotionally disturbed. He, as her legal adviser, Stark, and Dr. Reed had signed the commitment papers. Sighing deeply, he said:

"It was one of the hardest things I've ever been called upon to do. A lovely, gracious lady in her day. Pitiful, pitiful . . ."

"Did you have to?" I was shocked. "I know she was queer and getting queerer, but surely Stark could take care of her at Menlo with all those servants . . ."

"I'm afraid not." My father shook his head. "You see—and this is just between us; the family naturally wants to keep it as quiet as possible—Mrs. Bartow attacked her daughter-in-law with a kitchen knife the other night."

"Gloria?"

My father nodded. "While she slept. They were alone in the house. Fortunately for Gloria, her Russian wolfhound was sleeping in her room that night. He growled and woke her up in the nick of time."

"How horrible! She wasn't hurt?"

"Only a small scratch on her arm she got when she took the knife away."

"But I can't believe it!" I protested, wondering at the same time just what I couldn't believe. Mrs. Bartow hated Gloria. Feared her. That I knew. And certainly there was much to indicate that she was unbalanced. Her most recent telephone call to me had attested to that. "I can't believe," I said, "that Mrs. Bartow would be capable of violence under any circumstances."

"Of course that was my first reaction." My father stroked his chin thoughtfully. "But then who isn't astonished by the workings of a disordered

mind? She probably saw no violence in what she intended to do. Quite the contrary, she undoubtedly meant to put an end to violence. Her own. According to both the son and daughter-in-law, she was tortured by hatred for Gloria. She was a highly civilized woman. It is hard to imagine her acting in an uncivilized way. Yet there was nothing civilized in her hatred for her daughter-in-law. What she did about it shouldn't have come as such a shock. What she did about it was simply an extenuation, an expression, if you will, of her inability to live with an emotion so alien to her."

Everything he said made sense, and I wanted to believe it, preferred to believe it rather than look too closely at the other possibility that plagued my mind.

"Did Mrs. Bartow admit to what she'd done?" I asked.

"I don't think she remembered much about it. These cases seldom do," my father said. "But she didn't deny it."

"Then you do believe she is insane and dangerous?"

"Of course. I signed the papers, didn't I? Dr. Reed has been worried about her for a long time. All of us have seen that she's not been herself. Tragic business. Tragic!"

I pretended even to myself to accept this verdict. Anything else was unthinkable. And yet . . . and yet . . .

And yet Mrs. Bartow died two weeks later at the sanitarium of wounds inflicted upon herself with a letter opener. She left a half-finished letter to her son, begging him to take her home.

I went to the funeral with my father. Flagg, who had scarcely known Mrs. Bartow and scorns all rituals attendant on death, didn't accompany us. We drove in silence to the church. My father seemed stunned, perplexed, and I wondered why he should be either. If he believed as he'd said that Mrs. Bartow had meant only "to put an end to violence, her own," then was this not the more logical way? The expected sequence? Or was he, like me, unable to think of anything but a lonely old lady who, stripped of dignity and of love, chose to die?

It had been so long since Mrs. Bartow had taken any part in the life of the town, if indeed she ever had, that I'd been afraid the church would be virtually empty. However, I'd reckoned without the Bartow legend. The church was crowded. There were those there who I'm sure had never laid eyes on Mrs. Bartow in life. Was it curiosity, the hope of mingling with those dignitaries from far and away that had attended Mr. Bartow's funeral

in such abundance that had brought them? I thought not. The people of Royal Bay are curiously impervious to such considerations. I think it was something far more personal, a proprietary interest in all that happens at Menlo. Outsiders they might be, these Yankee Bartows, but they possessed Menlo and the fortune to keep it intact. Looking at Gloria's black-clad back in the front pew, I thought, "The queen is dead. Long live the queen."

Beside her Stark stood tall and straight, his head held rigidly high, an almost military posture. Sunlight poured through the tall, arched windows, spilled across the flower-strewn casket. "He leadeth me beside the still waters . . ." I hoped the cheerful morning light, the poetry of the psalm had contrived to bear him backward to a sweeter, easier time and that once again he thought of his mother with the abandoned, untroubled love of childhood. I hoped that Gloria, out of compassion if nothing more, would try to comfort him.

We went out to Menlo after the funeral. There were only a handful of people there. Stark seemed pathetically glad to see us. He looked dazed and for the first time since I'd known him appeared unsure of himself. He took my hand in his. His mouth twisted into what was meant to be a smile. I started to speak, but he interrupted me.

"Please, Lucy, no platitudes. I've been a rotten son, and I know it. I should never have sent her away."

"You did the only thing you could have done," my father said briskly.

"I could have had nurses round the clock. A psychiatrist in from Charleston. Water over the bridge now," he said bitterly and abruptly turned and took us into the east parlor where Gloria sat on the damask sofa pouring coffee for Dr. Reed, the Reverend Howard, and their wives.

She lifted blank, unwavering eyes to mine.

"Hello, Lucy. Cream? Sugar?"

"Both," I said, but still she looked at me, eyelids narrowing. And as though what she saw annoyed her, she gave her head an angry toss and fell to pouring my coffee. My father and Stark stood to one side talking. I didn't like to interrupt them. I went and sat next to Mrs. Howard who, seemingly thoroughly awed by her surroundings, gave me a brief, tentative smile, murmured something that sounded like "such a pity," and subsided into her coffee cup. I attempted to draw her out but got only little nods of agreement in response. To escape her I seized on an empty sandwich tray and, pretending it my duty to refill it, I repaired to the pantry. I'd hardly put the

tray down when the door swung open and Gloria appeared. She closed the door carefully and remained leaning against it, green eyes fixed on me accusingly.

“Are you blaming me for what happened?” she said. “You looked as though you were.”

“Why should I?” In order not to look at her I began to fill the sandwich tray.

“Because you knew she made my life miserable. Because you used to come sneaking out here to see her, to listen to her crazy talk. Because you probably believed everything she said.”

“Everyone knows Mrs. Bartow wasn’t herself,” I said evenly.

“You know what she did, don’t you?” Gloria cried. “You know why she was put away, don’t you?”

“Yes, my father told me.”

“Then how can you blame me? How can anyone? She tried to kill me. In the middle of the night. In my sleep. With a knife. It was horrible! Horrible!” She covered her face with her hands as though to shut out the memory, and yet I somehow felt that through those bejeweled hands she watched me. Torn between compassion and doubt, I could think of nothing to say at once, but even as I fumbled in my mind for words she dropped her hands from her face. “You don’t believe me,” she said fiercely. “I can see it in your eyes. You think I lied.” Her voice was rising. “You think I lied to get rid of the old witch and that she died of it. That is what you think, isn’t it?” Without waiting for my reply, she flung the door open. “Get out of here. Go! Back to that sordid little apartment of yours and that wild sailor boy you think you’ve made so tame! What do I care what you think! I’ve everything I ever wanted. Everything!” Her eyes dared me to deny this. I had no wish to. I walked past her and through the door, into the dining room.

“Lucy?” The tone was humble, placating. I turned. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“That’s quite all right.” I’d never known her to be sorry before. I wished she wouldn’t be now. I wanted nothing so much as to be free of her. Now and forever.

“Lucy?”

“Yes.”

Pensively she leaned against the frame of the door, the only trace of the storm just past a luminosity about her eyes, a heightened color in her cheeks. “Do you realize that I’m now the richest woman in all Royal Bay? In all the county, I do believe. You won’t believe me, but I hadn’t thought of that. Not till this minute I hadn’t.”

“I’m surprised you think of it now,” I said.

“Perhaps I shouldn’t” — she sighed — “but it is comforting.”

## CHAPTER 13

Fall comes slowly to Royal Bay. October is only the beginning. Gradually the tired, sulky air of August is forgotten. Sky and water are a brighter, a greener blue. Queen Anne's lace, pink joe-pye weed, and wild aster bury summer's limpid fields under a sea of color. And everywhere is the cool sweet smell of tea olive and wild clematis.

For me October has always been a month of promise, of high hopes, and never more so than the October that followed Mrs. Bartow's death, for it was then I first became certain that I was pregnant.

I didn't expect Flagg to be pleased and he wasn't. With his passion for freedom parenthood would have to be an acquired taste. And this couldn't have come at a worse time for him. I would eventually have to give up my job. The purchase of the Portuguese's boat was out of the question.

However, Flagg's lack of enthusiasm did little to dim mine. I was filled with a secret and inner excitement that sent me flying to the mirror a dozen times a day to look for proof of the change in me. I even delighted in the fact that this had not been planned. A spontaneous creation. Love's fruit brought to bloom beside the sea.

We had to find another place to live. The Fayes' basement, much as we loved it, was not, with its drafts in winter and moisture in summer, a place in which to bring up an infant. The only suitable dwelling we could find for the same price was a hideous little box of a house, crowded by other like boxes, on the outskirts of town. However, it was compact and draftproof and had plumbing which worked with a quiet efficiency that I found enchanting. Flagg hated it. It gave him claustrophobia. I was treated that winter to some of the black, despairing moods, the contained silences that I guessed had plagued his parents throughout his youth. Yet he was ever tender and considerate of me. He worked late and early. I didn't blame him for staying away as much as possible. His restlessness when he was at home was a burden to us both. I went for long walks, taught myself to sew, and spent long, satisfying afternoons with Miriam, who was also expecting her first child, and Sue, who had been through it ahead of us and had a bald-headed boy to prove it.

It was a tranquil time. Gloria and Stark had gone to Europe shortly after Mrs. Bartow's death. I wasn't even aroused from my euphoria by the postcards they sent from places whose very names had used to make my feet itch—Rome, Florence, Venice, Paris. Stark wrote, "We are having a most interesting time. Today visited San Lazzaro and San Servalo. I speak enough Italian, I find, to do without a guide . . . garrulous thieves all of them . . . Picked up an original Giovella but not for a song, young girl combing her hair; the coloring reminds me of Lucy though not the expression, which is morose."

Gloria wrote, "Have written Mr. Ferris about transplanting camellias to south garden, but will someone make sure? . . . Bought saddle for Star in Florence, such beautiful leather there. Has anyone been to Menlo? The pyracantha should be in full color, the camellias budding. I am sick to death of museums, cathedrals, and out-of-the-way bistros. . . ."

I was not surprised. Gloria had not wanted to go. Or so Stark had told me a day or two before they left. He dropped in late that afternoon to say good-by. It was the first I knew that they planned to go anywhere. It was astonishing how easily Stark and I, when alone, fell into the comfortable relationship of our youth. I went on with my preparations for supper while he straddled a kitchen chair. He'd lost weight, looked worn. Commenting on this, I said I thought the trip an excellent idea.

"I wish Gloria could see it that way," he said bluntly. "Actually she needs it more than I whether she knows it or not. She's been in a state since Mother's death. Cruel as it may be, I'd thought she'd find it a relief having Mother gone. Quite the contrary. She imagines she sees her in every shadow, hears her footsteps around every corner. I suppose it's only natural after that nasty business of the knife, but for a while after Mother went away she was fine . . . it was only after Mother died that . . . delayed reaction, I suppose." This last he uttered in a questioning tone, and I murmured:

"These things take time. Travel always helps, of course. You say she doesn't want to go?"

"Doesn't want to leave Menlo. God knows I love the place, Lucy, but she has almost an obsession about it." He flicked open a silver cigarette case and without availing himself of its contents flicked it shut again. "What I really need," he said, "is a highball."

The best I could produce was a half-empty bottle of sauterne. I didn't like the quick, heedless way he drained his glass. He used to say liquors were to be savored. However, the sauterne had a pleasantly relaxing effect

on him. He fell to talking about a book he wished to lend me. A biography of Ibsen. We became embroiled in a passionate argument over the playwright—genius or craftsman. Flagg came home and the talk turned to cattle and shrimp.

Stark's herd was growing, prospering, but he was having irrigation problems and Gloria wished he'd give up the project and turn to horse breeding, which she considered a more appropriate undertaking for Menlo. I turned the oven down to delay supper awhile and listened, enjoying the man talk. I remember thinking what a contrast they made, the red-haired creek boy with his easy tongue and ready laughter and the black-locked, somber prince of Menlo. I remember thinking how strange the heart's choice. I remember feeling grateful that this was so, for otherwise . . .

Stark and Gloria stayed in Europe eight months. Sarah was born while they were gone. She was born at seven o'clock of a May morning. She had a head shaped like an ice-cream cone and exquisite hands, and from the moment Flagg first saw her whatever misgivings he'd had vanished. The look of excited wonder in his eyes was all the reward I needed.

"I'd no idea I'd feel like this," he confessed, "as though I'd grown a whole new dimension . . . emotions I never knew I had. All of them corny. Where'd she come from, do you suppose? Really, I mean?"

Like *The Gull*, that other precarious investment, Sarah brought us good fortune. The shrimp were plentiful that summer and the market for them high. Flagg made some wise investments and with the profits enlarged the wharf at Eaton's Landing, laid plans for a packing house. The Portuguese had sold his boat but, undismayed, Flagg found another, a derelict at half the price, which he planned to make over when he could afford to. With what pennies were left Flagg took me to Charleston and bought me a new dress. We stayed the night and had dinner at Francine's. The same young man who'd played his accordion to us long ago played again. I was no longer afraid of what the music and Flagg's smile would do to me. I knew.

In the fall my father, increasingly lonely in the big house, moved to the inn, and after much debate and many qualms we moved into the house on the bay where I'd grown up. I couldn't bear to see the house sold. The rent we paid my father, we reasoned, would go into the purchase price. By shutting off half the rooms and doing my own work, I felt we could swing it.

Funny what moving into that house did to me. Marriage up until then had meant simply being sublimely in love under the best possible circumstances. The birth of Sarah had done little to alter this concept. The

house that had harbored at least two generations of my family and would now, God willing, shelter another made me feel all at once grown up. A woman with a woman's responsibilities not only toward home and family but toward the community. I joined the woman's auxiliary of King Charles' Chapel and a book club which only a few years ago I'd have scoffed at. I had my father and Flagg's parents for Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner. If there was something a little smug and pompous in this display of matronly responsibilities I was unaware of it. I was unaware of much in those days. It is all very well to tell myself that I was blinded by happiness, the dupe of contentment, but I'm not sure that this is altogether true. I'm not at all sure that my blindness was not quite deliberate. A glaucoma of the heart that may well have begun with Mrs. Bartow's last telephone call and after her death became chronic.

Let no one ever say it is not those sins of omission that sear the soul and set the heart to cringing in the small hours of the night. The "why didn't I?" knows a more hopeless regret than the committed mistake.

For instance, why didn't I guess that Gloria, having satisfied one dream, the dream of possessing Menlo, would become afflicted with another? Even Flagg, who then had known less of her than I, had seen that. "She is made for love," he'd said; "God help her when she finds it out."

And why when Stark finally came to me and poured out his embittered heart did I not take heed? I was blind, blind, blind!

They returned from Europe looking fit. They came at once to have a look at Sarah, bringing a silver porringer from Venice with her name engraved on it. It was near her feeding time and Sarah could not have been less charming had she practiced for hours, sucking her fists, howling at sight of them. Stark was amused, Gloria indifferent. They didn't stay long.

"I wonder if they'll ever have children," I mused to Flagg. "I can't imagine it somehow."

"I think it's cruel even to imagine it." Flagg grinned. "What would the poor little tyke do for a mother?"

"Oh, I don't know. Having a baby changes a woman."

"It hasn't changed you," Flagg said. "I was afraid it might."

"Were you? In what way?"

"I was afraid you'd stop thinking of me as a man and start thinking of me as a father. I was afraid you'd try to make me respectable."

“But you *are* respectable. You are the respectable Mr. Thorpe, president of Thorpe Seafood, captain of the Thorpe fleet!”

“Only to the naked eye,” Flagg said and pulled me down on his lap. Gloria and Stark were forgotten. In those days it was possible to forget them.

I didn’t see much of the Bartows that fall and winter. I was busy getting settled in the house on the bay. Gloria was busy too. She had become a proficient horsewoman and was getting her beloved horse Star ready to take to the spring horse shows in Virginia. She was taking singing lessons in Charleston and French lessons from the Canadian wife of a new young lawyer in town, and she and Stark were doing a frenzied amount of entertaining. They invited us frequently and occasionally we went, but I was finding that a baby radically curtailed our social life. Gloria dropped in now and again on her way to or from market. She seemed always in a hurry and never stayed long. Never more than a minute if Flagg wasn’t there. This, of course, I realized only in retrospect. Though I was not really sorry that our lives were taking such divergent paths, I found I missed Stark. On one of Gloria’s hurried visits I told her as much. I said, “Tell him to stop in some time. It’s been months since I’ve laid eyes on him. How is he?” She looked at me oddly.

“Don’t you know?”

“Know what? Has he been sick?”

“You could call it that. He’s drinking much too much.” She tossed her head impatiently. “I thought of course you’d know. You always seem to know whatever goes on at Menlo.”

It was the first time since the scene in the pantry after her mother-in-law’s funeral that she’d spoken sharply to me.

“No, I don’t know. I still don’t,” I said irritably. “That doesn’t sound like Stark, not like him at all.”

“Oh, I don’t mean he’s completely gone.” Gloria shrugged. “He only drinks in the evening, but then he drinks until he can barely stagger up to bed. It’s disgusting!”

“Disgusting?” I said blankly.

“I used to think, whatever else, that he was a gentleman. Stuffy but a gentleman. You should see him!”

“Have others seen him?” I don’t know why, but my heart ached at the thought of that.

“He’s too proud for that. He waits until the others have gone, when there are others. He makes very sure that I’m the only one treated to the truth about him.”

“Oh, Gloria, how dreadful!” Inadvertent tears filled my eyes.

“I can tell you it hasn’t been easy . . . I never dreamed . . .”

“Dreadful for *him!*” Angrily I interrupted. “People don’t drink like that without a reason. Especially people like Stark.”

“The strong can have reason, plenty of reason, and not drink.” Suddenly her eyes were flashing, her mouth set. She snatched her pocketbook off the chair. “If you only knew,” she cried. “If anybody had reason it’s me, but I don’t go crawling to anything or anyone for help.” She whirled about and was out the door before I could stop her.

“Tell him,” I called after her, “tell him to come to see me. Maybe I . . .”

But it was no use. I knew she would not tell him. And I am sure that she did not, but one day months later he came, and I don’t think that it was coincidence that it was a day when Gloria was out of town and Flagg in Key West aboard the *Sara*. I came home one afternoon from a meeting to find Stark sitting on the sea wall smoking a pipe and absently watching Sarah at play in her pen nearby under the sycamore tree. He had brought, he said, some books he wished to lend me, poetry by a new young Italian poet. He’d be interested to see my reaction. I searched his face for some telltale sign of dissipation and found none. The line from nose to chin had deepened; his mouth had hardened. True, there were deep circles around his eyes, but the eyes themselves were clear and intent.

“I’ve been trying to make friends with your daughter,” he said, “but she prefers her wooden beads. How they do grow! Or has it really been so long since I’ve seen you?”

“It’s really been so long.” As he seemed disinclined to move I sat down near him on the prickly tabby wall.

“‘Naught treads so silent as the foot of time,’” he quoted. “It seems only yesterday that you and I were playing Robin Hood in the woods at Menlo.”

“Does it really?” I laughed. “To me it seems a hundred years ago, in another life.”

“Another life,” Stark repeated thoughtfully. “I’m not sure I like that. Continuity is the thing. Yesterday, today, tomorrow. I like things of a piece. Do you really think we change that much?”

“Of course we do and how dreadful it would be if we didn’t. I’ve never prescribed to the Grecian Urn ideology—who wants to be calcified in time . . .?”

“There are moments . . .”

“Memory keeps those freshest. A moment prolonged through eternity would grow frightfully tiresome.”

Stark laughed aloud. It was a sound I’d not heard him make of late. “Ah, Lucy, you do me good!” He plucked at a loose oyster shell protruding from the wall, extricated it, tossed it into the bay below. “You make me forget for a while that I am a madman and a fool.” His smile was wry and not directed at me but rather, it would seem, at himself. I’d never minced words or thoughts with Stark; I did not now. I said:

“Are you referring to your drinking?”

“That too. What have you heard?”

“That you are drinking too much.”

“Too much?” He cocked a quizzical eyebrow. “Perhaps. Enough for my purposes may well be too much.”

“Enough?”

“Enough to slake the stronger thirsts.”

“Your marriage disappoints you?”

He scowled, knocked the ashes from his pipe. “Marriage?” he scoffed. “What marriage have we ever had, Gloria and I? You should know. You who know what marriage is. What love is. I saw that much. That night at the beach. I wish to God I never had! Not that I’d have been fooled forever, or she able to pretend . . . but to see it so clearly. In one split second. To know. And go on knowing and go on loving for all the knowing. It’s hell, Lucy. If I could only stop wanting, stop caring, we could live side by side politely as friends do. If I could only put an end to this passion . . . but the sight of her, or even the sound in another room of her voice, the scent of her perfume . . .” He broke off, spread his hands in a gesture of helpless despair.

“And you can’t bring yourself to leave her?” I said.

“I can’t bring myself to leave Menlo. I offered her her freedom if she would give Menlo back to me. Freedom and all the money she wanted to enjoy it. She laughed in my face.”

“She is wicked, wicked,” I breathed.

“Not wicked.” He sighed. “Caught just as I am. Trapped. She by a place, I by a woman. She is as wretched as I.”

“She is incapable of love!”

“I wish I believed that. For a while I did but I think, I am almost sure that she dreams of someone. There’s been a change in her. In a temper I accused her of dreaming of a lover. She didn’t bother to answer, but she looked startled, frightened almost.”

“You mustn’t torture yourself in this way,” I said. “You’ve enough without imagining a rival.”

“I don’t imagine a rival exactly, not yet, but she has begun to dream of one. I see him in her eyes, in her smile; she’s changed, I tell you!”

“Let’s be practical,” I gently chided. “Who could it possibly be?”

“That’s the devil of it. I don’t know. Can’t guess.”

“Then don’t try to. You’ll only make yourself more unhappy than you are now.”

I’ve wondered since why I did not think that afternoon of the message his mother had wished me to give him . . . why I did not give him that message and with all the vehemence that his mother had intended. “Tell him to give her what she wants, anything, and let her go.” But one doesn’t treasure the words of a madwoman or think to pass them on. Nor would Stark have heeded them. It is only that I might feel that I had done all that it was in my power to do.

It was hard to know what to say to him that afternoon or how to comfort him, though I think that to talk was all the comfort he wanted. He stayed on awhile and watched me bathe and feed Sarah, and when he left he said he felt ever so much better. He said, “Don’t take my histrionics too seriously. And please don’t be too hard on Gloria because of them. She needs your friendship whether or not she shows it. If I would get myself in hand, Gloria and I could have a decent life together. After all, we’ve Menlo in common.” He grinned his old half-serious grin. “I expect too much of life,” he said.

I only saw him alone a handful of times after that and then briefly and by accident. Once I said, “You are looking well.” He was. “That’s because I’m behaving myself.” “And Gloria?” “Of course.” He sounded as though I’d no right to ask. I was not surprised he regretted having confided in me. I’d expected, especially if things improved at Menlo, that he would. I

interpreted his snub to mean just that. And I was happy for him. Nothing happened between that confessional afternoon on our sea wall and Stark's death the following August to enlighten me as to the true state of affairs at Menlo. To all outward appearances the Bartows seemed, if not glowingly happy, content enough. Though I knew Gloria would not change, I believed Stark must, as he'd wanted to do, have got himself in hand and that they were in truth beginning to have "a decent life together." And so it was that I, at first, accepted his death, as did everyone else, as an accident. I wasn't entirely blind, entirely stupid. I had reason to accept it as such because I was there. I was there, and Stark himself before he died told me that it was an accident.

## CHAPTER 14

I remember everything about the day he died. Happiness revisited takes on a special flavor. And I was never again to know such innocent contentment.

I woke slowly that August morning . . . always August . . . I woke savoring the two-year-old singsong musings of Sarah in the next room. There was no hurry about getting up. Flagg was gone and would not be back until the next day, and Sarah was never demanding at this hour. I lay gazing at the pale, limpid sky beyond my windows, languidly reviewing my schedule for the day. I was entertaining the women's auxiliary of our church that evening, and though I'd been making small preparations for days there were many last-minute details to be attended to. Flowers . . . Gloria had told me I might come and take my pick from the Menlo greenhouses. That, I decided, inhaling the heavy August air, I would leave until late afternoon when it would be cooler.

"May I come cuddle?" Sarah stood, tentative and eager, in the doorway. I moved to make room for her. "Tell me where Daddy?" Flagg's sea-blue eyes looked excitedly, expectantly into mine. This was no ordinary request. This was the acknowledged formula used to pry from me stories about *Miss Pritchard*, *The Gull*, and her namesake, *Sara*.

We loitered in bed until pangs of hunger drove us out. I'm sure I exaggerate the pungent taste of the coffee I brewed in the kitchen that morning, the music of Sarah's laughter when I read to her from her favorite *Mrs. Tabby Cat* as we ate. And did I really sing as I washed the dishes, made the beds, polished my mother's silver? I remember that I did.

Sarah "helped" make cookies, frost a cake. Afterward we took a picnic lunch down to the sea wall. A cooling breeze blew in from the west. I looked seaward down the sound. I imagined Flagg somewhere out there, copper hair gleaming in the sun, eyes squinted against the August glare, and knew a moment's acute longing.

Afterward I stretched beside Sarah as she napped on our bed and browsed through the book of poems Stark had lent me almost a year ago. Obscure and bitter most of them, I wondered at Stark's enthusiasm. "For me not the crystal rim but the hollow inner bowl. The useless inner gaping

emptiness crying for fruit for flowers.” I assumed that much had been lost in the translation, but even so this was far removed from Stark’s erstwhile idols —Tennyson, Shakespeare. “Death is only darkness and night its eunuch keeper.” I shuddered and put the book down, beginning to compose the arguments with which I would confront him.

Just as Sarah was waking, Sue dropped in with small Tommy. They were on the way to the beach. She wanted us to come along. I let Sarah go with them. Thank God I did not take her with me to Menlo that afternoon. It was almost four when I set out. I drove rapidly, making my own breeze of the motionless air. Halfway there I realized I’d forgotten to bring Stark’s book. I cursed the August heat that made mush of my memory. Stark was punctilious about returning books himself and quite naturally expected the same punctiliousness of others.

The greenhouses are on the left of the driveway at Menlo and before you get to the house. I was tempted to stop and gather my flowers and make a quick getaway. I felt pressed for time, and I knew Gloria wouldn’t mind. However, it had been many weeks since I’d seen either Gloria or Stark, and it did seem ungracious not to make myself known. I parked my car beside the phaeton Gloria had imported from Europe. I was glad to see that Stark’s car was there too.

I was startled as I walked toward the pillared entrance to hear, coming from the open upstairs window above me, the jarring sound of voices raised in anger. Stark’s voice pitched to a ruthless key, Gloria’s hysterical, shrill, protesting. I hesitated, not to eavesdrop but to decide whether to go forward or back. Though the air except for their terrible and discordant duet was breathless still, I could understand only a little of what they said. A word here. A phrase there . . .

“Fool!” . . . “In hell first” . . . “Love him, love him!” . . . “He doesn’t know you’re alive . . .” “He will” . . . “Fool” . . . “Shall warn . . . shall tell” . . . “No! No!” So distraught was I, so intermingled their voices, it was difficult to know who said this or denied that, but that final cry of protest was Gloria’s, that sharp “No” as though her very life depended on it. My one thought was to escape before they should see me. I half turned, but as I did there was a sudden silence. Total. Complete. Had they dropped a brick on my head they could not have made it clearer that they had seen me. Instinctively my eyes flew to the window above and saw a shadow melt backward into the room. I felt I had no choice. I walked resolutely up the steps and rang the bell. I could hear its echo. I could hear something else too. Footsteps? Muted voices? I don’t know. I don’t remember. Nor do I

remember how long I waited. Minutes? Seconds? I only remember a terrible thudding sound and Gloria's scream and how my heart turned over so that I could neither move nor breathe. And how I pushed open the door and ran into the hall and stopped just short of the splayed heap at the foot of the stairs that was Stark. I remember Gloria's face catapulting toward us down the stairs, anguished, disembodied, a face seen in nightmares a thousand times since. We fell to our knees on either side of him, she calling his name, I dumb with fear. Slowly, miraculously, his eyes opened.

"He's alive," Gloria breathed. "The doctor—I must call the doctor." She scrambled to her feet, half ran, half stumbled into the library. Dazedly Stark's eyes followed her, dazed still, turned on me.

"Lucy?"

"Yes, Lucy." I took his hand in mine, brushed the hair back from his forehead.

"I tripped," he said. His eyes, beginning to clear, searched mine restlessly. "I tripped on the stairs."

"I know," I said. "Now be still. You must be still. Gloria's calling the doctor."

"I want her here. Here with me. No doctor. Just Gloria." His voice sounded stronger.

"I'll tell her," I said, but I made no move to go and in a moment he said:

"Why does she take so long? Has she run away?"

"Of course not. Sometimes it takes a few minutes to get through."

"You'll go before he comes, won't you, Lucy? You'll go and tell no one you were here?"

"If that's what you wish." I supposed he was remembering the quarrel and wanting me to forget it. I supposed, though I could detect no odor of it, that he'd been drinking and that he wished me to forget that too.

"No one, understand?" I nodded, but still his look was anxious, questioning. "You never came to Menlo today. You must promise me."

"I promise you."

Gloria, flushed and breathless, returned. "I got Dr. Reed. Finally. He'll be here as fast as he can get here." Once more she knelt beside Stark, but it was me she addressed. "Dr. Reed asked how it happened. Did you see it?"

“I tripped,” Stark said. “My heel caught in the carpeting.”

“You can speak!” Gloria exclaimed. “Oh, oh, oh, you’re going to be all right. Poor, poor Stark.” She bent her face to his and tears fell from her eyes. “Oh God,” she moaned.

With the greatest effort Stark raised his arms and put them around her, holding her face against his own. “Fear not,” he said. I was no longer needed, no longer wanted. I got to my feet.

“You aren’t going, are you?” Gloria said. “You must stay and tell the doctor how it happened.” She drew away from Stark and looked at me beseechingly.

“I’ll tell him,” Stark said. “Let her go. I want to be alone. With you. Just the two of us. There’s so much . . .” His voice, sounding weaker now, broke off on a sigh. With a clutched feeling in my heart I walked to the door. I looked back once. He had pulled Gloria to him again, and his eyes were closed.

I saw no one about the place, not even Ferris’s familiar figure around the greenhouses or down at the point where he fished. It was a Thursday, probably the help’s day off. If only there had been someone to see me, to come forward and tell of my presence there on that day . . . If only I’d passed Dr. Reed on the narrow road leading out to Menlo instead of speeding past on the highway beyond, too intent on haste to look to the right or left . . . If only I’d told Sue Smythe where I intended to go that afternoon . . . or if Flagg had been at home waiting and not fifty miles out to sea. All those futile, empty “ifs,” any one of which could have released me from the foolish promise I’d made to Stark. But it was not of this I thought as I drove tearfully homeward that afternoon. I thought only of Stark, how gray he’d looked, the weakness of his voice, the sadness of his eyes. Childlike, I kept my fingers crossed on the steering wheel and made little inward prayers in his behalf. I looked at my watch and calculated how long it might be before Gloria would call and tell me how he was. I parked the car in my own driveway before I remembered I was to pick up Sarah at the Smythes’. It was Sue Smythe’s warm smile making me want to blurt out my distress that reminded me I’d been sworn to silence. Sarah’s excited babbling about waves and shells bridged the moment’s awkwardness. I prodded Sarah into “thank you’s” to Sue and, adding a few shaky ones of my own, left.

“See you tonight,” Sue called after me, and for a second I couldn’t guess what she meant. The auxiliary meeting! I stopped at the florist’s on the way home and bought the bouquet I’d gone to Menlo to pick.

The ladies of King Charles' Chapel Auxiliary began arriving at eight. The Faye sisters, as always, afraid to miss a minute of the pre-meeting gossip, were the first to get there. Tonight they brought gossip of their own. The widow Thayer and Old Mr. Tunbridge were courting! Miss Dorothea was disapproving. Miss Fanny wistful. "You'd think," said Miss Dorothea, "after being married to Bertrand Thayer these twenty years she'd be more particular." "I don't know," said Miss Fanny. "There's a lot to be said for companionship. She could do worse. Always have liked the elegant way Mr. Tunbridge carries himself, and they say she's got enough money for both of them."

Others arrived to take sides. I stole a look at the clock on the mantel—eight-thirty and still no word from Gloria. Bernice Rowe, the librarian, and Mary Smart, whose husband sold real estate, limped in, complaining of the heat. Daisy Glover came with Sue and put a damper on the widow Thayer discussion. She was related to Mrs. Thayer, remotely, but still no one wished to be quoted as it was common knowledge that Daisy twisted things. Daisy was oblivious of the momentary pall. She had news of her own. Had we heard there'd been an accident at Menlo? Her voice was shrill and had a way of riveting your attention whether or not you were interested in what she was saying. Instinctively my hands groped for the nearest object which turned out to be the back of the chair Miss Dorothea sat in.

"What sort of an accident?" Miss Dorothea queried mildly. The room fell silent, and when the silence was complete Daisy said:

"It seems young Mr. Bartow fell down the stairs this afternoon. They don't know if he'll live."

Above the murmured, "How dreadful!" "Whatever do you suppose?" the "ahs" and "ohs," I heard my own voice, shrill as Daisy's.

"Who doesn't know if he'll live? Who told you this?"

"Dr. Reed's secretary herself. I called Dr. Reed's office about a prescription for Danny's hives. She said he couldn't be reached and that was the reason she gave." Goaded, I suppose, by the harshness of my voice which she misunderstood, she added, "I'd have thought you'd know all about it, Lucinda. You're so close with them out there. I'd have thought they'd have told you."

Every eye in the room was fixed on me expectantly. I opened my mouth. Closed it.

“You never came to Menlo today. You must promise me.” And I had promised.

“No, they didn’t tell me. I didn’t know.” It was as simple as that. So simple . . . and I monstrously committed.

Miss Fanny Faye, that year’s president, called the meeting to order. Mary Smart drew papers out of a battered case and read from them: “The price of the materials to mend the Sunday-school roof will run to almost two hundred dollars. The men of the parish have volunteered their services which will save the cost of labor. The question is, with only five hundred left to cover this year’s expenses, should we . . .”

I tiptoed out to the telephone in the hall and called Menlo. I counted ten rings and then I hung up and called the number again. Still there was no answer. I thought they had probably taken Stark to the hospital, but it was hard to believe there was no servant about at this hour, day off or no. Distractedly I called Dr. Reed’s number. He himself answered the telephone. I told him who I was. I said I’d called to inquire about Mr. Bartow.

“Mr. Bartow,” he said briskly, “died at six o’clock this evening. His neck was broken. There was nothing I could do.”

It was neither shock nor grief that I felt but total disbelief. Whatever deaths I’d experienced so far had been comprehensible—Glory’s father died of failure, my mother of a bad heart, Mrs. Bartow of madness—but this death was incomprehensible to me. My reactions were wooden, matter-of-fact.

“Where is Mrs. Bartow? I just called Menlo and got no answer.”

“She is there.” Dr. Reed was as matter-of-fact as I. “She said she wished to be alone, to be undisturbed.”

“Do you think she should be alone at a time like this?”

“She was very explicit. I offered to call anyone she wanted to see, to take her anywhere she wanted to go. She wanted to be left alone.”

“I see. Thank you very much. Let me know if there’s anything . . .”

I went from the telephone into the bathroom where I took two aspirin. I don’t know why I did that. My head didn’t ache. I felt nothing. I combed my hair, replenished my lipstick which needed no replenishing, and when I could bear to face that roomful of smiling, chattering women, I returned to it.

Except for an argument between Daisy and Miss Dorothea about next year's bazaar, the meeting seemed to have deteriorated. Bernice Rowe and Mary Smart carried on an unrelated whispered conversation; Miss Fanny's eyes wandered wistfully toward the dining room and the punch bowl.

"I move the meeting be adjourned," Miss Fanny pronounced firmly. Someone seconded the motion. I went into the dining room and stood behind the punch bowl.

"Such a lovely flower arrangement."

"Wherever did you find the recipe for these cookies?"

"I know I shouldn't, but I'm going to have just one more cup of punch. This heat . . ."

Sue, looking at me curiously, said, "Don't you want me to take over for a while? You look positively green. Are you pregnant again?"

"It's only the heat, the insufferable heat!" But she must have caught the anguish in my voice, must have seen it in my eyes, for she said:

"I saw you go to the telephone. Has something happened? Flag? Your father?"

"It's Stark," I whispered. "Only I don't want them to know."

"Shall I get them out of here?"

"I'm not at all sure I want to be alone."

Miss Fanny, who'd sidled up for her fourth cup, said, "Who does? Cheer up, child. From what I hear it won't be long before your husband will be able to hire enough men to handle all his boats, and then he'll be home with you every night." She laughed gaily and shook her head. "Whoever thought to see Flag Thorpe settled and prosperous! Tell you the truth, there wasn't a soul in Royal Bay who would have bet a nickel on the marriage when you two walked down the aisle."

"And now," Sue said loyally, "there's not enough money in all Royal Bay to buy it."

"I only meant to praise," Miss Fanny said and turned a wide, reproachful back on us.

Funny that it should be Sue, the merry, lightweight one, the one I'd never felt close to, who received the brunt of my grief over Stark. For I found after the others had gone that I must talk to someone. I think had I

been alone I would have talked to the empty walls. Sue stayed and helped me carry the cups and saucers into the kitchen, stayed and helped me wash and dry them. I talked of our youth, Stark's and mine, before there was any Gloria, before there was any Flagg. I told her about the books we read, the arguments we had, the dances at Menlo, the charades. I told her about the night Stark had given me his grandmother's brooch, and when finally, at last, I began to cry it was not for that broken figure at the foot of the stairs who called for a wife who'd never loved him, but it was for the young prince of Menlo that I wept, the arrogant young prince who was no more.

She brought me clean handkerchiefs from the bureau upstairs. I'm sure she didn't understand why I was so deeply affected, nor did I expect her to. There was comfort almost in the platitudes she proffered. "He had a wonderful life, everything he wanted, always." "These things happen. Just be thankful it wasn't Flagg. There's always something to be thankful for." "Think of poor Gloria. I suppose she'll sell Menlo."

Sell Menlo! I almost laughed aloud. It would have been an ugly sound.

Sue offered to spend the night, but she had her husband and children to think of. And I was no longer afraid to be alone. When she'd gone, I lifted the sleeping Sarah from her crib into my bed. Her soft, untroubled breathing eventually lulled me to sleep.

I called Menlo first thing the next morning. A maid told me that Mrs. Bartow was still resting, but Gloria's voice cut in on another extension. "It's quite all right, Mary. I'll speak to Mrs. Thorpe." There was silence while she waited for the maid to hang up and then:

"Lucy? I suppose you know. I should have called you, but I was sure you'd hear, and I didn't feel like talking. It's all so crazy and unreal. A bad dream. I keep pinching myself, trying to wake up. First thing I'm going to do is have the stairway changed. So steep and treacherous. I can't stand to look at it." She paused for breath and when I was silent said, "Are you still there?"

"Yes. Is there anything I can do?"

"Do? Funny, I keep thinking Stark will attend to everything. I haven't even decided when to have the funeral or whom I should notify."

"Would it be any help if I came out?"

"Nothing will help. Thanks just the same." She sounded tearful. She also sounded firm.

“Well, let me know if I can do anything.”

“I suppose you’ve told everyone the details so I needn’t be bothered explaining . . .” Her voice trailed off on a breathless note, and I said:

“No, I’ve not told anyone anything. Not even that I was there. Stark asked me not to.”

“I know. He told me. But under the circumstances I thought you might feel differently. But a promise is a promise, isn’t it, whether it makes sense or not.” Though this was not a question, she seemed to want an answer.

“I haven’t had much time to think about it,” I said uncertainly, “but, yes, I suppose you’re right, a promise is a promise.”

“A dying request, you might say. I’m sure he had his reasons even though we’ll never know what they were.” She sighed.

“Of course,” I said, afraid that I knew only too well what those reasons were. If I could never say I was there, then I could never say that he’d quarreled with his wife or that he was in the habit of drinking too much when he was unhappy. He was a proud man, a reserved man. I thought I understood his request. To keep covenant seemed the least I could do.

“If you have any doubts,” Gloria persisted, “tell me, because it would be dreadful if I should tell one story and you another.”

“I have no doubts,” I said.

“Not even where Flagg is concerned?”

That I had to think about for a minute. Would I find it possible to keep an experience of such moment from him? “You never came to Menlo today. You must promise me.” To Gloria I said, “I’ll not tell Flagg.”

“I just didn’t want to make any slip,” Gloria said. “I just wanted to know for the record. By the way, is Flagg there? I’m going to need his help. I don’t know the first thing about legal details, all the hideous aftermath . . . and Flagg has such a splendid head for business. Stark often took his advice and I know would want me to.”

“I’m sure he’ll do anything he can. And then, of course, there’s Father . . .”

“I wouldn’t dream of imposing on your father,” Gloria said quickly. “I know he’s not been well lately. Stark named some Pittsburgh lawyer connected with the mines as executor, but that was ages ago and I need

someone close. I don't want any stranger from up north. Flagg I know I can depend on."

"I see." I wondered why I should feel more annoyed than touched by this unexpected honor.

"May I speak with him a minute if he's there?"

"I expect him this afternoon or tonight," I said. "I'll have him get in touch with you as soon as he comes."

"Thank you," Gloria said.

When Flagg did come I saw that he had already heard of the accident. Though he might make wry fun of Stark, he'd liked and respected him. He was deeply shaken and also anxious about me. He took me in his arms. "Poor Lucy," he said, and, "Poor Stark, poor unlucky devil!"

Dutifully I gave him Gloria's message. "I've never had any experience with wills, but of course if I can be of help . . . I must call her," he said. "I half thought you'd be at Menlo. In fact, I almost called there before I came home. Have you been there?"

"Not yet," I said. "Last night Gloria wanted to be alone. I called this morning, offered to go, but she didn't encourage me. She seems to be taking it in stride."

"You should have gone anyhow," Flagg said. "Poor kid, she's probably hating herself for not being a better wife."

"And why shouldn't she?" I said hotly.

"No reason at all," Flagg said affably, "but I still say poor kid. Guilt can hurt worse than grief, you know."

"I know no such thing." I was being unreasonable, but I was tired of Gloria's tragedies which weren't her tragedies somehow at all but mine. "Why do you take up for her when it was Stark who was cheated?"

"Here, here," Flagg soothed. "I know you're upset, unstrung. This is no time for petty bickering. I admit she gave him a rotten deal, but it takes two to make even a bad bargain!"

"That's not true!" I cried, thinking of how Stark had loved her. How hopelessly, wretchedly, he'd loved her. "For Gloria it may have been a bargain. Her beautiful body in exchange for Menlo, but Stark didn't know. He thought it was to be a marriage!" Trembling with the withheld rage of years, I stormed from the room. Nor did I go with Flagg to Menlo that

afternoon. In my frame of mind I could be of no help to Gloria. Nor did I relish Menlo, stripped now of everything that had given it meaning.

It rained the day of the funeral. It rained all day. It began sometime during the night, a hard, straight, tropical rain, thick, heavy, unremitting. The church was dark and damp. In the churchyard we stood under umbrellas which failed to protect us from the rivulets of water that washed about our feet. Gloria never got to the funeral. Two of Stark's Princeton friends were to bring her, but on the way she fainted and had to be taken home.

Flagg went straight from the funeral to my father's office. He hoped my father would help guide him through the intricacies of helping Gloria with Stark's estate.

The will had been drawn up shortly after Stark's mother's death. It was very simple. He left everything, his stock in the Bartow mines, his cattle, a hunting lodge in Canada which I'd not even known about, to "my beloved wife Gloria." He didn't have to leave her Menlo. It was already hers. To Lucinda Fenwick Thorpe he left an amethyst brooch that had belonged to his grandmother. It was the very same brooch that I'd returned to him on the night he'd told me of his love for Gloria, and I cannot, to this day, bring myself to wear it.

## CHAPTER 15

I've always felt that the love affair between Gloria and Flagg had its start in those long hours they spent together right after Stark's death, going over the details of his will and arranging to sell off his cattle, a mammoth undertaking in itself. Flagg denies this and I'm sure believes he speaks the truth. A man is more likely to pinpoint love's start with the moment of the heart's surrender—a moment hardly likely to take place over Stark's dead body, as it were, in the businesslike study at Menlo. But this period of proximity made Flagg aware of Gloria not only as a woman but as a person, a person in essence much like himself. And it gave Gloria the opportunity she had so grievously yearned for. I know now that when Stark suspected her of having a lover he was in part correct. She at least dreamed of one. She dreamed of Flagg. For that was her way. First the dream, and then . . . But it is not for me to trace the course of their love. By the time I learned of it, it had become an insurmountable fact, its origins all but lost to me. Nor am I, when I recall the pattern of our marriage at that time, enlightened. There were, as there are in all marriages, periods of discord when tensions rise to unbearable levels. But is it not just these times that give the sweet, the easy times their fullest flavor?

Gloria was often in my thoughts in those days but not because of her love for my husband, which I knew nothing about. Unconsciously at first, and later unable to help myself, I found that I was, in moments of fatigue or depression, reliving in my mind the last afternoon of Stark's life.

I at first treated these recurrent moods, as I called them, as a natural reaction to shock and grief. Unpleasant as these memories were, I hoped that in letting them have their way with me I would be purged of them. And this was the case. Little by little the scene at the foot of the stairs took on a hazy unreality until all that haunted me was that never so long as I lived would I be permitted to speak of it. "You never came to Menlo today. You must promise me." The request had not seemed incomprehensible to me then; why did it now? But it did. I found myself examining it, fretting over it, looking for a loophole whereby I might escape the silence imposed on me. I found none. A promise is a promise. But why had Stark demanded it? He knew I hated duplicity, was uncomfortable with the smallest lie. It was not like him to think first of protecting himself, not even in death, especially not

in death. Something throbbed at the back of my mind, elusive, capricious. The notion was gone even before it was born.

It is possible that in my preoccupation with these troubling, inconclusive inner debates I failed to be aware that my husband was having some troubling inner debates of his own. It is possible that I should have suspected many things which I did not suspect—Gloria’s uncharacteristic interest in Sarah, Flagg’s uncharacteristic interest in “meetings.” I’ve wondered if my ignorance was my undoing or if it was not my greatest strength. To be forewarned is not always to be forearmed. There is a power, a craftiness, that comes with shock.

Stark had been dead for two years when the shock came. It was August again. And as always in August tempers are frayed, nerve ends laid bare by the heat. Flagg and I quarreled that morning. I can’t remember what about. We never quarreled about anything important. And usually we made up almost at once, but that morning we hadn’t, and I was left feeling depressed and vaguely lonely. I busied myself at my desk awhile. Flagg’s business was flourishing. He now had a fleet of five boats, a canning installation, his own small office building separate from the plant itself. I had a full-time maid and, treasure of treasures, leisure time. Some of this time I used to try my hand at writing poetry, a secret yearning of mine which I’d never dared confide even to Stark. This morning the sonnet I was working on went dead beneath my pen. A nagging sense of estrangement from Flagg persisted. On impulse I went to the kitchen and packed a picnic lunch—French rolls from the bakery, Flagg’s favorite cheese, two luscious red-gold apples, and a bottle of Chianti wine. It was a time, I told myself as I worked, for loving surprises, for extra attentions, not for futile brooding.

Skimming over the road to Eaton’s Landing, I felt all at once absurdly gay, abandoned, a young girl again, flying to woo her own true love.

Dark thunderclouds gathering in the east failed to dismay me. I reasoned if worst came to worst, we could picnic inside. Flagg’s office with its ocean maps and ship’s-bunk couch was gay and comfortable. I was, though, dismayed to find Gloria’s car parked beside the main buildings. I knew she often came to Eaton’s Landing to buy shrimp fresh from the boats for the Menlo table, but I’d no intention of sharing my tryst with her. I parked my car beside hers and left the picnic basket inside it. Flagg’s office is set apart from the other buildings in a small grove of pines and can only be reached by a short winding pathway. He has regretted this site. He wanted privacy and he got darkness. The towering pines shut out most of the light even on the brightest of days. The sky today was growing darker with every distant

rumble of thunder. I saw that the lamp on his desk was on. I hastened toward the wide square of light that was his window. A few feet away I heard the sound of a woman's laughter. I could see no one through the window. Only maps, a chair, the lamp, Flagg's desk, the empty swivel chair before it. I don't know what presentiment prompted me to slow my steps. Perhaps the airy, intimate quality of that laughter. Whatever it was, I felt suddenly cautious and afraid, as though it were I and not Gloria who was the intruder. Closer now, the window afforded a view of the couch. I stopped and stared. I choked back the cry of protest that rose in my throat. They did not see me. They sat cross-legged at either end of the couch. Between them was a large straw hamper. I recognized the hamper. It was one that Stark and I had used when we were children to carry our picnics in. As I watched Flagg closed his eyes and put his hand in the hamper and drew out a large golden pear. He opened his eyes and smiled.

"I've never seen such a pear. You must have stolen it," he said.

"Of course. I've never had anything in my life that I didn't steal."

"Or beg or borrow . . ." Flagg grinned, bit into the pear.

"I never beg." She tossed her head proudly. Flagg, no longer smiling, leaned across the hamper and kissed her. He kissed her on the mouth hard and long and as though he'd been doing it for years. The hamper toppled to the floor, spilling paper plates and half a cake. They scarcely noticed. I turned and ran down the path and across the roadway to my car. It had begun to rain. In a few minutes it was pouring. About a mile down the road I stopped the car. I picked up the picnic basket on the seat beside me and threw it out the window. I felt no better. I got out of the car, the rain all but blinding me. The bottle of Chianti had rolled into a ditch, but it hadn't broken. I wanted it broken. I grasped it by the neck and hurled it against the trunk of a tree. I got back into the car soaking wet and shivering and drove numbly home.

The numbness didn't last. I shouldn't have come home. I shouldn't have gone up to our room. Flagg's bureau and mine side by side, our beds a hand's reach away. Everything I looked upon spoke of unity, of the daily comfort of love. I wanted to go back to Eaton's Landing and kill them both. I wanted to go to Menlo and wait for Gloria and when she came scratch her beautiful eyes out, choke her with that magnificent hair. I threw myself across the bed. I wanted to cry. I could not. I got up, took off my wet clothes, drew a bath. I lay back in the warm water and tried not to think, not to remember. I did think. I did remember. "Don't you ever think about who

you'll marry?" And Glory's reply: "I used to. I used to think about it a lot." I could almost see Gloria, her hand with the fork drawing heart shapes on the tablecloth at Marty's. "Someone wild and handsome and daring. Someone who wasn't afraid of anyone or anything." Oh, it was easy enough to see what had happened to Gloria. What was it Mrs. Bartow had said when she told me of Gloria's presence at Menlo, her hold over her son? "Almost as though it were planned." And I'd said, "No, not planned. Dreamed. And then made come to pass." And made come to pass! But how? Flagg was not a man to be moved by flattery, governed by desire. To believe he'd been seduced would do him a grave injustice. Even in my extremity I granted him this.

Limp, exhausted, I dragged myself out of the tub. I stood naked before the bathroom mirror, but all the mirror told me was that I was a woman and afraid.

Sarah came in from her afternoon walk as I was dressing. She sat in the rocking chair, crossed brown legs. "I saw a bird. Its wing was broken. How's it going to fly any more?"

"Wings sometimes mend themselves."

"I tried to bring it home. Alvira wouldn't let me." A tear dropped unheeded from one eye. "Are you going to a party?"

"No."

"But you're putting on a party dress."

"I want to look especially nice," I said and abruptly pulled the dress off, all at once revolted by the idea . . . the injured wife making one last play for attention. The demure white cotton I finally chose gave little indication of the fever that consumed me. I didn't know what to do with the hours until Flagg should come home. The storm had only briefly cooled the air. It was already hot again, and the added moisture from wet grass and trees was almost suffocating. I went out on the piazza. I walked the old unpainted boards until my feet could feel the soreness they made, and still I walked. Flagg and Gloria. Gloria and Flagg. They had looked so, so happy. More than that. In tune. Of a piece. Invulnerable. It was that that had frightened me, sent me running like some ill-armed woods creature breathing danger.

When the sun began to sink into the sound I went inside. I let Alvira go. I fixed Sarah's supper myself. I read to her while she ate.

"You sound trembly," she said crossly.

Flagg came in just as Winnie the Pooh got his head stuck in the honey jar. I went on reading. As impatiently as I'd waited his coming, now that he was here I didn't know what to do about it. I wasn't ready. I never would be. "A horrible heffalump," cried Piglet, "a helluva hoffalump." Flagg kissed the top of Sarah's head, brushed my shoulder with a husbandly pat, and went upstairs. A few minutes later I heard him singing in the shower. How could he? The book dropped from my hands. I began to cry.

Sarah had never seen me cry. She was more interested than disturbed.

"Did you bump yourself?"

"Sort of."

"I didn't know mamas cried." She mopped at my eyes with a damp dish towel.

"That's enough. All better now." I managed a watery smile.

"I fell down today, and I didn't even say 'ouch.' I said 'upsy-daisy.'"

"Good for you. And now to bed." I picked her up and carried her upstairs. She didn't need carrying, but she needed to know that even though mommies might sometimes cry they could still be strong.

As we passed our room Flagg called out to me, "What's for supper?"

The thought of food sickened me. "I don't know. I'll have to see." He came and stood beside me as I heard Sarah's prayers. I steeled myself against the persuasion of his presence, against the scent of clean linens and shaving cream. He bent to kiss Sarah good night, red head, gold head lightly touching. I turned and left the room.

He came downstairs presently, past the parlor where I waited and into the kitchen where he expected to find me. I heard ice rattling in a glass, and in a moment he appeared in the parlor door holding a drink in either hand.

"Gin and lime juice," he said. "For the heat. Let's take it out to the porch."

"I'd rather here if you don't mind. I want to talk and voices carry out there." I could not meet his eyes and thought how stupid, it is he who is guilty.

"If it's about my bad temper this morning, I meant nothing. Can't we forget it?" He gave me my glass and started to the door.

“It’s about Gloria,” I said quickly, sharply. “About you and Gloria. Are you in love with her?” The hand that held my glass shook, spilling some of the cold liquid on my dress.

“In love with Gloria?” He turned ever so slowly and slower still let himself down on the piano stool opposite me. His eyes never left my face. Alert and probing those eyes, as though he, not I, were the inquisitor. “What makes you ask?”

“I went out to Eaton’s Landing today. I wanted—never mind what I wanted. I saw you and Gloria. I saw you through the window. You seemed very happy together. Are you in love with her?” I held my breath and prayed he’d deny it, and as the moments passed and he did not, I prayed he’d deny it even if he lied to do so.

“I don’t know,” he said finally. Twisting his glass between the palms of his hands, he stared blindly into its swirling contents. “Whatever I feel, it has nothing to do with you, with us.”

“Nothing to do with me?” I cried. “Gloria of all people. First Stark. Now you. Why? Why? What’s wrong with me? What’s wrong with our marriage?” My voice was rising. Flagg put down his drink, came and sat on the arm of my chair, tried to put an arm about my shoulders. I leaped up and away. “No, no, you mustn’t touch me. I loathe you. I wish I were dead. I wish she were dead. She’s evil, evil, evil!”

“Then so am I!” Flagg said. “We’re alike, Gloria and I. It’s got nothing to do with you. Nothing to do with our marriage. God knows I never wanted to hurt you. I still don’t.”

“Are you trying to tell me this is just a passing affair and that if I’ll only be patient . . .” My voice was sour with scorn.

“No.” Warily he got off the arm of the chair, retrieved his drink, drained the glass. “I’m trying to tell you that I love you just as I always have, that I wouldn’t be married to anyone else. That if I hadn’t found you I’d never have married at all. Not then. Not now.”

“Then what *do* you feel for her? Passion? Desire?” My anger made a mockery of the two.

“I’ve told you I don’t know what it is I feel. Don’t know, don’t want to know. I only know she is never long out of my thoughts.” His hands made a helpless gesture in the air in front of him, and he turned and left the room. I heard him go down the piazza steps, but I didn’t hear a car start. I looked out of the parlor window and saw him silhouetted against the moonlit water as

motionless as the air he breathed. I waited until I was sick with waiting and finally, because I couldn't help myself, I went and stood beside him. I said:

“This has been going on a long time, hasn't it?”

“A year. Maybe longer.”

“Much longer. Even before Stark died,” I said. “I heard them quarreling about you one day. I didn't know then who it was they quarreled about. It was the day . . .” I'd started to say “the day Stark died” but remembered not to.

“You must be mistaken,” Flagg said. “I knew Gloria only slightly then.”

“But she knew you. Wanted you. Stark must have guessed it.” My heart constricted, thinking what this guess must have done to him. Could it be that, blind with pain and rage, he'd tripped on purpose? I rejected this notion at once. It was not commensurate with the man. Even had he chosen to die, he'd have chosen a more likely, more private death.

“Whatever Stark may have guessed couldn't be helped,” Flagg said. “She never loved him. She loved Menlo. From the time she was a child, a raggedy child hungering after beauty.” He spoke with a tenderness I found unbearable.

“She was a cruel, selfish child,” I cried in protest. “And now she's a cruel, selfish woman. How can you love her?”

“How can I not? Tell me that and I'll give you my right arm.” Abruptly he turned and would have walked away, but I put out my hand, clutched his arm.

“You frighten me. You sound as though you've no intention of giving her up.”

“How can you give up the way you feel about someone?”

“You could stop seeing her!”

“That wouldn't make any difference. We don't change, Gloria and I.”

“But I do.” It was all I could do to keep my voice low so that what I said wouldn't carry to the house next door. “Doesn't that mean anything to you? I've changed just since this morning. And I'll go on changing as long as I know you are seeing her. I'll change and change until there'll be nothing left of me.”

“And if I stop seeing her?”

“Then I will forget any of this ever happened. I’ll make you forget it. I’ll never mention it again.” I sounded desperate. I felt desperate. I felt that I was not only fighting for my life but his. His eyes sought mine for a long, thoughtful moment.

“Very well,” he said finally, but his voice held no note of resignation or defeat, and I knew with sickening certainty that he lied. Knew I had no one to blame but myself. I’d left him no choice.

We walked in silence to the house, carried the silence with us upstairs to our room. He undressed quickly and was in bed when I returned from the bathroom. I thought he was asleep. I turned off the light and lay stiffly down, resenting the ease with which he found forgetfulness, but in a moment he turned on his back and said:

“Have you been happy with me?”

I longed to punish him with a “no,” to regale him with invented grievances, to engage his pity and hold to it.

“Until today,” I said, “I’ve been exceedingly happy.”

“Thank God for that.” He sighed deeply and soon I heard him breathing the slow, even breath of sleep. Exhausted, I, too, must have fallen asleep because I dreamed. I dreamed that Mrs. Bartow, all in black, came and sat beside me on the bed. “What have you done with my son?” she said. “I can’t seem to find him.” I dreamed that Gloria came to the back door and asked to borrow a cake pan; she said, “If I’m going to marry Flagg I’ll have to learn to bake cake.” I gave her a cake pan, and then I gave her five pounds of flour; on top of that I put the heaviest cookbook I could find and on top of that five pounds of sugar. “But I can’t carry all this,” she said. Still I kept piling things into her arms. “I can’t help it if I’m beautiful and you are not,” she said, and suddenly her burdened arms broke off. But when I looked again there was nothing to see but a great mess of flour, sugar, and spices on the kitchen floor which I hastened to clean up before Flagg should come and ask me how it had got there.

But the dream that woke me, sweating and writhing, was about Flagg. I dreamed *Miss Pritchard* sank to the bottom of the ocean and he with her. I dreamed they brought his body home and that I threw myself upon it and that the lips moved and spoke to me. “I am drowned,” they said. “Why didn’t you save me?” they said, and his eyes looked sorrowingly into mine.

I woke more tired than when I went to bed. Flagg had gone, leaving a note propped on my dressing table. “Am off to the Keys for a few days

fishing. I need to think. Remember I love you as always.” I tore the note up and flushed it down the drain. My head throbbed furiously. My thoughts were ugly. Incoherent. I rushed from one task to another in a frenzy of useless activity. I was short with Sarah. I fired Alvira and then had humbly to beg her forgiveness. In the afternoon Miriam came to pick me up and take me to a tea. I’d forgotten the tea. I told Miriam I wasn’t well. I didn’t want to see people. More than that, I did not want people to see me. I felt that my wound must be visible. I spent a sleepless night pacing our room, my room now, and vastly lonely. It seemed terribly important that I come to some decision. I came to many. I would take Sarah and go. When Flagg returned he would return to an empty house. The only voice to greet him, the heavy voice of regret. But where would I go? And could I count on regret to come and fetch me back? Better still, I would lock and bar the doors against his return. Better still, I would go to Menlo and confront Gloria with my knowledge . . . to what end? She would only laugh at me just as she’d laughed at Stark when he’d offered her freedom in exchange for Menlo. She would laugh even harder, because I would be offering her nothing in return for my husband. Gloria! My thoughts veered away from Flagg, turned on her in an inward raging anger that even I found frightening. I explored every nook and cranny of my life that Gloria had ever touched. I explored with a cold and searching eye. And everywhere I looked I convinced myself of evil. Hate, I was learning, has its own eyes. I sat once more in Mrs. Bartow’s suite at Menlo; I listened once more to her fears for her son. Only now I listened sympathetically. Once more I heard her whispered pleading that had ended with a premature clicking down of a telephone receiver. Her last cry for help snatched from her hands! And to make her silence assured, a story about knives in the night. I returned to Menlo and stood under a window and listened again to Gloria and Stark quarreling. A meaningless quarrel to me then. Sharply, cruelly clear now. “He doesn’t know you exist.” “He will.” “Shall tell, shall warn . . .” “No! No!” Was it I Stark wished to warn? Or Flagg? Or both? And then they’d seen me in the garden below the window. “Shall tell, shall warn,” and suddenly there I was. There to be told. There to be warned. Unless Stark was silenced. In fear, in anger, in the hysteria of the moment might not Gloria have pushed him, tripped him down the long, treacherous flight of stairs? And if she had, Stark would know it. Did know. “Has she run away?” he’d said. “You never came to Menlo today. Promise me,” he said. Thinking that I’d seen something I did not see? Thinking I knew what I did not know? His dying wish to protect his love? “Fear not,” he’d said to Gloria. The pieces fell into place, fitted neatly. Made reason of what until now had seemed reasonless. “Tell no one you were here.” And I had told no one. No one.

## CHAPTER 16

Flagg returned from the Keys in a few days. I had not taken Sarah and gone away. I had not barred the doors. I had not gone to Menlo and confronted Gloria with what I knew. But I had come to a decision. It was a crafty and a complicated thing that I contemplated, and I needed time to think it through. I could not afford to fail. I had told Flagg that I had changed, but not even I realized how much. Sometimes when I thought of what I planned to do I turned cold with self-loathing. At other times I felt proud, I felt brave, I felt enormously clever. “Fight fire with fire,” I told myself. Over and over, a cry to battle, “Fight fire with fire.”

If Flagg had, as he’d said he’d needed to do, done any thinking while he was gone, I’d no way of telling. On his return he threw himself into his work at the plant. I could see no change in him. I wondered that he could not see the change in me. I wondered that he couldn’t see that I’d become silent and secretive and inwardly occupied. I no longer went where I might encounter Gloria. My closest friends I shunned for fear in some weak and ill-guarded moment I might betray myself. I waited. I waited until Flagg should go away and I could count on his being gone a full week. I waited until September was past and gone and October almost over, and, like one obsessed, the longer I waited the stronger and surer I became. And yet when Flagg told me one morning that he must go North the next day to contact a new broker, that he would be gone ten days or more, I felt my knees turn to water.

“Try to get out while I’m gone,” Flagg said. “See some people. You’ve been looking peaked lately.”

“I will,” I promised. “I will.” And for all the weakness in my knees there was no tremor in my voice. “Fight fire with fire,” I told myself. “You’ve come a long way,” I told myself. “You can do it,” I told myself. But I could not kiss him good-by. It would have been the kiss of Judas.

That night I took a sleeping pill and then later I took another. The next morning, as though this were to be no special day, I ate a good breakfast, I did the marketing, I played for a while with Sarah in her sandbox, and then, feeling strangely detached, I drove to Menlo. I had reckoned with Gloria’s not being at home, but I had not reckoned that she might have guests. I should have. She was becoming more and more conspicuously a part of the

town. She entertained frequently, chose her charities with an eye toward social advancement, and gave freely of her time to such causes as caught her fancy.

Miriam Tolles's car was parked in the driveway. If there must be someone there I would have chosen someone I didn't know.

A new maid let me in. The servants never seemed to stay long. Just Mr. Ferris, taciturn and bitter, worshiping only his beautiful employer, remained. Gloria and Miriam were in the study drinking iced tea. I have seen Gloria in many different lights, but it was agony to look upon her now for the first time as contender for my husband's heart and to find her more beautiful than she'd ever been. She radiated a lightness, a softness, a glow, those accoutrements to beauty that come only with love. Her eyes widened when she saw me in the doorway. It had been a very long time since I'd come to Menlo without calling first, longer still since I'd come alone. Her eyes widened and for a surprised moment she said nothing. Then all at once, remembering Miriam, she got up to greet me, sent the maid for more tea, talked all the while . . . "How nice! It's been simply ages. Where's Sarah? You should have brought her; we've a new litter of puppies."

Miriam said, "I'm glad you've come. Maybe you can help persuade Gloria to let us show Menlo this year on the tour of houses."

"Stark's mother," Gloria said crisply, "always sent fifty dollars to the church and her regrets."

"But you're not Stark's mother," Miriam coaxed. "It's little enough trouble. One day's house cleaning before, another afterward, and you're done."

"No, no." Gloria shook her head.

"But why not?" Miriam pursued.

"I don't share Menlo with strangers," Gloria said firmly.

"You talk as though Menlo were a person, not a place." Miriam shrugged, gathered up her pocketbook.

Whether she sensed Miriam's disapproval and could not withstand it or whether she was afraid of being left alone with me I couldn't tell, but suddenly she capitulated.

"Very well. I'll grit my teeth and go through with it, but you mustn't rush off. Please stay and have lunch. There's so much you'll have to tell me about what's expected. Let me just run back and let Daisy know—she's a

fabulous cook and doesn't often have a chance to spread herself. You really must—”

“Not today, I'm afraid,” Miriam interrupted. “I've still got to tackle Miss Hughes and the Faye sisters, but give me a rain check. I can't tell you what a feather it is in my cap to have got Menlo. Thanks a million.”

As Miriam walked to the door, Gloria had such a frantic look that for a moment I thought she would go running after her and pull her back. Of course she didn't. She returned laconically to her chair. “You've not touched your tea,” she said. “Does it need more ice?”

“No, thank you. Nothing.” I put my glass down and folded my hands firmly in my lap.

“You look as though you're about to deliver a sermon.” Gloria laughed nervously. She got out of her chair and wandered to the big, flat-top desk that had been Mr. Bartow's. Brushing an imaginary piece of dust from its top, she said, “Surely you didn't come all the way out here to just look at me. Do you realize you've hardly said a word since you came? Is something the matter?” She half leaned, half sat on the desk, her hands braced against its edge, their knuckles protruding whitely.

“You know very well what is the matter,” I said. My eyes never left her face, though it was all I could do to look at her. Thoughtfully she bit her lower lip, but before she could speak I said, “We can skip the wife-versus-other-woman scene. I didn't come to talk about you and Flagg. I came to tell you you must leave Royal Bay and never come back.”

“Whatever for?” Scornfully her eyebrows lifted, and she looked at me pityingly. “Are you out of your mind? You know I'll never leave Menlo as long as I live. Or Flagg,” she added with frightening complacency. I felt my control beginning to slip away. I willed myself to calm. I stood up. I made my voice soft. I made my eyes hard.

“You have no choice,” I said. “Either you leave Royal Bay within the week or I shall have to break the promise I made Stark. Either you go or I will tell everyone how Stark died and why. I'll tell what actually happened here that afternoon.”

“How interesting.” She was suddenly very pale. “Just what did actually happen, and how is it you've kept so quiet about it all this time?”

“Because I promised Stark. At the time I'd have promised anything to comfort him. I didn't know he'd not live to release me from it.” As I spoke I walked slowly toward the door. My heart was pounding. If she let me reach

the door, go out of it without protest, then I'd been wrong, grievously wrong. I couldn't bear the uncertainty. I quickened my steps. I reached the door. Behind me Gloria said:

"You're bluffing, you know. Trying to scare me. You can't possibly know what happened because you weren't there. You didn't come in until afterward."

I paused, my hand on the doorjamb. "If I weren't there, saw nothing"—it was now my turn to smile pityingly—"why did Stark beg me to keep silent?" I sighed, turned. "How he loved you!" I took one step out the door.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Gloria cried. "Stark tripped. Everyone knows that. He told you so himself. How dare you come here and threaten me with lies?"

"I only know what I saw," I said.

"What did you see? Or think you saw?" She whirled toward me, stood over me. "What is this lie you hope to ruin me with?" Was it anger that made her eyes so dark? Or was it fear? I didn't know, couldn't tell. Slowly, deliberately, I played my last card.

"Through the window I heard you and Stark quarreling. I wanted to leave, but you saw me before I could go. I went to the door, knocked. I was upset by your quarrel. When no one came I opened the door. You and Stark were on the landing, still arguing. Suddenly you pushed him. I don't think you meant to kill him, but that is what you did."

"Lies! Lies!" Gloria cried. I thought she was going to strike me.

"If they are lies you'll have every chance to prove it. Tomorrow. To Magistrate Barnes."

"You've been to him?"

"Not yet. I told you all you have to do is leave Royal Bay within the week and I'll tell no one." It was then I saw the Bible. The huge Bartow family Bible. I went and snatched it from the shelf, laid it open on the desk. "All you have to do is swear on this Bible before God that you will leave Menlo within the week and never come back so long as I am alive."

"You are mad! Insane!" She was no longer pale but flame-red.

"That, too, you can prove to Magistrate Barnes tomorrow."

"No one will believe you." Slowly, like someone who has just eluded some exhausting danger, she sank into a chair. It was that, that gesture of

relief, of release, that, far from discouraging me, made me feel for the first time sure of my ground. “Why, you’ll be the laughing stock of the town,” she continued, regarding me through narrowed lids, “cooking up a murder charge you’ve kept mum about for two years because you find your husband loves me. Really, Lucy, couldn’t you have thought of some more plausible way of getting rid of me?”

“I didn’t come here to argue with you.” I still stood beside the open Bible. “And I’m only giving you this one, last chance. Either you swear to leave or I go straight from here to the magistrate’s office.” For a long, uncertain moment our eyes met.

Gloria tossed her head defiantly. “Anything to get you out of here,” she said, and swiftly rose and came and put her hand on the Bible, “I swear to leave Menlo,” she said quickly, breathlessly.

“And never to return so long as Lucy is alive,” I prompted.

“And never to return . . .” She broke off and turned tear-filled eyes to me. “If you think I’m admitting anything, you’re crazy. I’m only doing this for Flagg. You’d ruin us both with your lies if I didn’t. Why? Why? I’ve never taken anything that was yours. Stark never loved you. Not the way a man has to love a woman. The part of Flagg that belongs to me never did belong to you. You didn’t even know that part of him existed. You don’t now. Has he ever slapped you? Called you ugly names? Told you he hated you? Told you you were a part of him? Held you so close he broke your rib?”

“Stop!” I held shaking hands to my ears. “You’ve a week. If you’re not gone I’ll see that there’s an investigation into the death of your husband.” I took my hands from my ears and walked past her. I didn’t look at her. Nor she at me. As I went through the front door and out I heard behind me the harsh, broken sound of her sobbing. Weak and faint and sick, I leaned against one of the great white pillars that supported the roofs of Menlo. I remained there until my legs felt strong enough to take me to my car.

It was a long and wretched week, the one that followed. A week of searing conflict, of hope, of despair. *What* would she do? What right had I to play God? By the week’s end I almost wished she’d call my bluff, denounce me. I heard nothing from her. Twice the telephone rang late at night. When I answered it there was no one there.

On Saturday the week was over. Not until Sunday did I learn that Gloria had gone. A baffled and perplexed Miriam called me Sunday afternoon. She and Bill had been invited for cocktails at Menlo that day. They'd driven out, only to find a morose and noncommittal Ferris placing shrouds on the furniture, closing the shutters. Mrs. Bartow, he said, had gone to Europe for an indefinite stay.

"I'm telling you," Miriam said, "it was eerie. Here I am, dressed to the teeth, expecting a party . . . two other couples came while we were there . . . she apparently hadn't told them either. . . . We milled around the door for a few minutes, and when it looked as though no one was coming I opened it—it wasn't locked—and hallooed for Gloria, but I could tell as soon as I looked inside something was wrong—no flowers anywhere, and the place still as a tomb except for a hammering sound coming from the back of the house. I hallooed again, and pretty soon Mr. Ferris ambled out. We asked him if this hadn't been a bit sudden, if she'd given any reason. He looked as though he thought we were being inexcusably impertinent and said he didn't know, couldn't say. Do you know anything about this, Lucy? Did she say anything to you about going away?"

"Are you sure she's gone?" I asked.

"Of course," Miriam said impatiently. "You've only to stick your head in the place to know. It *feels* empty. Deserted. And why should Ferris lie about a thing like that? I don't understand it at all. I've called a couple of people, and they don't know any more about it than you. It's mighty queer, if you ask me. Have you any idea what's behind it? Any theories?"

"None offhand."

"You don't sound too surprised, but then you knew Gloria better than any of us."

"I didn't know that she wasn't perfectly happy and content at Menlo, if that's what you mean," I said.

"You don't suppose she's got someone in Europe . . . a man perhaps . . ."

"I never heard her speak of one."

"Maybe she's in some sort of trouble . . . but that's ridiculous, not with her money! Oh well, time will tell."

"Did Ferris say where she was going in Europe?"

"That's another thing. She apparently didn't know herself. Mr. Ferris said she told him she'd send him her address when she knew what it would

be. Doesn't that strike you as odd?"

"Not especially," I said. "You're probably making a huge mystery out of something as simple as a sudden impulse to travel."

"I hope you're right," Miriam said, "but you'd think she'd have said *something to someone*, wouldn't you?"

"You'll probably hear from her." I felt suddenly exhausted.

"That's possible," Miriam conceded. "But if you should hear anything, let me know. Frankly, I'm not sure we shouldn't notify someone."

"Who?"

"I don't know. Someone that could find out exactly where she did go . . . and that she went under her own steam. No foul play involved."

No foul play involved! My palm holding the receiver sweated cold; my cheeks burned hot. "But Mr. Ferris said . . ." I broke off, trying to remember just what he had said.

"Oh, I know. I'm undoubtedly brewing a tempest in a teapot. I'm still feeling the effects of that ghostly cocktail party and those echoing hallways. I'll sleep on it. But if someone doesn't hear something in a few days, I do think we should take steps to find out what it's all about."

After Miriam had hung up I remained at the telephone. The momentous impetus that had driven me so relentlessly for the past many weeks had deserted me. I no longer felt brave. I no longer felt strong. I thought of Gloria fleeing in exile and felt no triumph. I thought of Menlo, empty, deserted, and felt no upsurge of relief. I thought of Flagg returning to find his love mysteriously gone, and I began to tremble. I thought, "Whatever I've done, it has been done in the name of love," but I only trembled the harder. I jumped up, almost knocking over the table on which the telephone stood. I ran through the house looking for Sarah. Only when I found her, held her to me, breathing in the innocent clean smell of skin and hair, did my trembling stop.

## CHAPTER 17

Flagg returned the following Tuesday. Tossing and turning in the small hours of the night, I had decided I would let him find out about Gloria's departure for himself. He would not remain in ignorance long. For two days the town had talked of little else. Rumors were rife—she had eloped with a mysterious stranger . . . the Bartow mines were failing . . . she had gone to Europe to find a husband. In the end it was Sarah who told him. Trailing me to market, her three-year-old mind must have plucked some nugget of excitement from the talk she heard around her, for she included the information in her recital of the week's happenings, sandwiching it between an account of her kitten's lame paw and Alvira's toothache. "Mrs. Bartow runned away," she said. "They looked and looked, but nobody can't find her anywhere."

She'd never called Gloria Mrs. Bartow and I doubt knew of whom she spoke. Nor did Flagg seem to for a moment. He'd hardly been in the house an hour and still wore the harried businessman look New York always gave him. I had made hot chocolate. We sat in front of the living-room fire, Sarah on his lap.

"Poor Alvira," he murmured sympathetically, and then, "Who ran away?"

"Mrs. Bateau," Sarah said and looked to me for assistance. "You tell him, Mommy."

"She means Gloria," I said, and put down my cup lest I spill it. "It seems she left Menlo rather suddenly. People were perplexed. Sarah has heard them discussing it."

"Oh?" Flagg said evenly. "Where did she go?"

"To Europe." I could not meet his eyes or even look at him. "For an indefinite stay, according to Ferris."

It seemed hours that Flagg was silent. I felt I was drowning in his silence. Presently he lifted Sarah off his lap, walked to the fireplace, kicked an ember log. "Did she give any reason?" he said, his back to me.

"No, she told no one she was going."

“She runned away,” Sarah chimed, delighted with the importance of her news.

“Surely she must have told someone!” Flagg said angrily.

“Ferris,” I said quickly, breathlessly. “She told him.”

For a long, thoughtful moment Flagg stared into the fire. Suddenly he turned, eyes bright with anger, wide with pain. “She’d never leave Menlo without telling me!”

I didn’t answer him. I picked Sarah up. “It’s her suppertime,” I said defensively and started from the room.

“Is there any mail for me?” There was no mistaking the hope in his voice. I wished his hurt need not be mine.

“Nothing here,” I said. “Perhaps at the office . . .” I hurried out. I fed Sarah, took her upstairs to bed.

“Why Daddy cross?”

“He’s not really.”

Flagg came to the kitchen door as I fumbled about, preparing our meal.

“I’m going out awhile,” he said. “Don’t wait for me. I had a late lunch.”

Briefly, silently our eyes met, swung apart. “Very well,” I said.

I knew where he would go and what he would and would not find there. I heard him come in about eleven, but he didn’t come to bed. He stayed the night through in the kitchen. He sat in my father’s rocking chair beside the pot-bellied trash burner and read a detective story and drank wine until the bottle was empty, and then he opened another one. He was not a drinking man. I didn’t go to him. I wouldn’t have known what to say to him if I had. Nor he to me.

## CHAPTER 18

Eight-year-old Sarah tilted some of the perfume from the bottle she held onto her wrist, held the wrist to her nose. "It still smells like lemon," she said. "Who is Gloria?" she said. "I heard you and Daddy talking about her this morning. You sounded cross. Is she the lady who belongs to Menlo?"

"She used to. Long ago." Used to, long ago, sedative words, no longer true. Why did I use them? "'The sky is falling,' cried Chicken Little." That is why.

"Mary Tolles says she is very beautiful, like a gypsy princess, and that Menlo is beautiful like a palace. Why haven't I ever been there?"

"You've been there. Only you were too young to remember."

"Can I go now that she's back? Is she back now for good?"

"I don't know. Don't know! Don't know!" I cried. Sarah shrank away from me, her eyes filling with baffled tears. Quickly I hugged her. "I wasn't angry with you, pet. It's this heat. This August heat!"

In the next room Betsy woke with a wail of hunger. Her needs are simple, many, and always urgent. Betsy, child of our healing wounds! The freshet spring that replenished our battered love. She stood in the doorway, tipsy with the sleep that still clung to her. "I want seeral with bananas. I want to wear my pink dress. Can we go to the beach? Can I take my cat?"

I dressed her in her pink dress. I fixed cereal and bananas. I took them to the beach. I did not take the cat.

Betsy covered my feet with a sand mound. "Don't wiggle your toes until I say."

If only their commands could govern my thoughts as ruthlessly as they did my actions. "The sky is falling." I wished there were someone I could talk to. Someone to whom I could say, "Gloria Bartow has come back to ruin me. She would not have dared come back otherwise." Someone who would accept the truth of this, someone who could tell me how to prevent it. Prevent what? I didn't know, I didn't know. . . . Who to ask? Where to turn? My father, felled by a stroke two years ago, for the most part lived in a hazy, comfortable past in which he imagined my mother waited on him. And

Flagg's mother wouldn't know what I was talking about. The deadly passions had long since passed her by. She would think I'd lost my mind. She would be nearly right.

Sarah rushed out to meet a wave. I howled her back to shallow water. Sue Smythe wandered up with her two-year-old twins and sat down on the sand beside me.

"I've been dying to talk to you or someone since Gloria got back," Sue said. "What do you make of it?"

"Of her coming back?" I said.

"Now you can wiggle!" Betsy commanded. I wiggled. Sue's twins laughed raucously as the sand tower crumbled.

"Not letting anyone know," Sue said. "Not writing to anyone except Ferris in the whole five years and then suddenly appearing again out of the blue. Ferris said he had only a week's notice. I had it all figured out at one time—I was sure she had a lover in Europe, someone she met over there when she used to go abroad with Stark. But Aunt Rebecca spoiled that."

"Aunt Rebecca?"

"Yes, my aunt who lives in Cannes, has lived there for years. I thought I told you. It's the only news anyone has had of Gloria in all this time." Sue tucked her feet under her knees cross-legged fashion. "You must have been away at the time. Anyway, Aunt Rebecca writes to me every now and then. It seems Gloria had a villa in Cannes for a while, and my aunt got to know her. Made a point of it, I guess, when she found Gloria was from Royal Bay. Not many people are, you know."

"Look, Mommy," Sarah called. "I can do the crawl, the Australian one. Look!"

"She really has got it," Susan exclaimed, "the kick at any rate. I wish my Tommy could do half as well. Did Flagg teach her?"

"Yes, at Pritchard's," I said impatiently, anxious to return to Cannes.

"That's why I think we should build a pool at the club. The ocean is no place to learn to swim." I could see Sue had forgotten Aunt Rebecca. I reminded her.

"I don't think Aunt Rebecca ever got to know Gloria awfully well. She said that was hard to do and wrote of her as though she were somewhat of a mystery to everyone. She said that, though Gloria never lacked for an escort,

her escorts found her so aloof, so indifferent, they seldom came back for more. She was invited everywhere and sometimes entertained, but Aunt Rebecca said she discouraged any close friendships and that her maid learned from Gloria's maid that the only mail she ever got the entire time was a weekly letter from the states written in the same hand. Of course, Aunt Rebecca assumed that she had a lover and that that explained everything, but Gloria's maid read one of the letters left lying around and said it was terribly dull and apparently written by her gardener—Ferris, of course. The only interesting line in it, at least interesting to Aunt Rebecca, was the last one, and that said, 'When are you coming home?' Aunt Rebecca said that only when Gloria talked about Menlo did she seem animated and she talked about it in such glowing terms no one could understand why she stayed away so long. Aunt Rebecca wondered if it was because she no longer owned Menlo. I wrote Aunt Rebecca that her going away and her staying away were as much a mystery here as there and would she try to find out more, but by the time Aunt Rebecca got my letter Gloria had moved to Paris."

"Do you really suppose Ferris wrote to her so faithfully?" I queried.

"I'm sure of it," Sue said. "Frankly I've always found him a creepy sort of character with those hooded eyes and that brooding walk, but you must admit his devotion to Gloria is touching. I honestly think it's quite sexless and all that he asks is to be allowed to stay at Menlo for the rest of his life . . . preferably with her there. His dream girl sort of thing. Heavens!" Sue broke off. "Where are those twins? They were here a second ago!" She leaped to her feet and ran to the water's edge. I made sure she'd found her missing progeny, and then I gathered up my two and left.

I drove down the hot, white shell road in the midday sun as though pursued by demons.

"Why are we going so fast?" Sarah, the cautious, the anxious.

"Because of the heat," I lied. Did I really think if I moved fast enough, kept on moving, this shapeless, unnamed doom would not catch up with me?

In front of our house a strange car was parked. My heart leaped in apprehension. A long black car with cream leather upholstery. The children raced each other up the steps ahead of me. Slowly I followed them. At the door I paused, closed my eyes, and took a deep breath. My nostrils, my lungs were filled with the scent, the heavy, choking scent of Gloria's perfume. I opened the door.

"Someone to see you." Alvira met me in the hallway.

“I know.”

“She is in the parlor.”

“Take the children,” I said. “Take them upstairs. In the yard. Anywhere.”

I walked down the hall, turned right into the living room. Gloria sat on the gold brocade chair. She was wearing a gold strapless cotton dress, her hair coiled about her head and fastened at the sides with looped gold combs. She might have been sitting for her portrait, so still and poised she was. Only her eyes moved when I came into the room. Lustrous and shining with a strange and eager light, they came to rest on me with an expression of such quiet disdain it was all I could do to pass through the doorway and into the room.

She made no move to rise or I to sit. I stood stiffly before her, a guest in my own house.

“Why are you here?” I said.

“To poison your life just as you meant to poison mine.” Her voice was low, without cadence. She might have been commenting on the weather.

“You have already poisoned my life,” I said bitterly. “Mine and everyone’s you’ve had anything to do with.”

As I spoke she toyed with a bracelet on her arm, pretending not to listen. “It took me a long time,” she said as though I’d not spoken at all, “to find out I’d rather go to prison than never see Menlo again. But I did find it out, and so I have come back. Won’t you sit down? I’ve much to tell you.”

Cautiously I sat, choosing a chair divided from hers by a small table holding a single flower in a vase.

“You haven’t changed at all,” she remarked, her glance sweeping me into oblivion.

“Nor have you,” I said bitterly.

“I’ve aged a thousand years,” she said. “Another year and I’d have died. I think you meant I should die.”

I said nothing. Outside the windows I heard the children playing “prisoner’s base.” “Ally ally in free!” sang Sarah.

“Do you know, can you imagine, what it is to wake every morning to nothing, to step into emptiness every night? And not even a dream to hold?”

No dream, Lucy. Nothing. For five years nothing. Can you imagine that, Lucy?"

"Let's get to the point," I said. "You said you'd found you preferred prison to exile. Do you intend then to go to prison?"

"Only if you go with me," she said softly, her eyes narrowing. A ludicrous vision of Gloria and me, handcuffed together, marching up to the Royal Bay County Jail flashed through my mind.

"What do you mean?" I said.

"I mean exactly that," Gloria said. "Only if you are willing to go to prison too." She smiled tremulously, stood up. "So I'd advise you to think it over before you start telling tales. And you'd better think hard, because you may find your sentence longer than mine. You see, I've only one count against me, involuntary manslaughter with a voluntary confession to my credit, but you have two counts against you." She paused to enjoy the full flavor of my bewilderment.

"Counts against me?"

"Yes. And don't think I won't make the most of them. Withholding criminal evidence, an accessory after the fact . . . an especially lenient jury might give you only five years, but then there's the question of blackmail. You blackmailed me into leaving Menlo." Her voice rose in excited triumph. "Even a lenient jury takes a dim view of blackmail."

"You wouldn't!" I too got up.

"Only if I have to. It's entirely up to you."

Betsy's voice floated up to us from the garden, piping clear and sweet. "Can't catch me, can't catch me." "Ally ally in free," cried Sarah. Gloria hesitated in the doorway, listening.

"How could you think you could have *everything* always"—she turned on me an angry, wounded face—"and I nothing forever?" Abruptly she went out of the door. I heard the quick, staccato click of her Paris heels down the hall. I went on hearing the sound long after she'd gone.

I went immediately upstairs and took a bath, driven, I suppose, by the notion that I would emerge cleansed in mind as well as body. I felt, afterward, curiously detached, strangely released. The secrets, the guilt, the fear of yesterday would now somehow have to be converted into the courage, the honor of tomorrow. "Only if you are willing to go with me." But I had gone with her for too long. Down all the long, dark, narrow paths

of hate and deception I had gone, trailing my heart in the dust. Over now. All over. In the open. Out in the open. I found I'd spoken the words aloud. "Out in the open." I found they had a beautiful sound. I wondered which of us Flagg would forgive. Which, which? But I was afraid I knew. A man condemns only those acts of which he himself is incapable. Flagg, with ample provocation, might be capable of murder in a fit of rage. Moral blackmail, never. With the coming of dusk my courage began to seep away; my thoughts grew small and frightened. A trial. Myself in court. Did you, Lucy Thorpe, on the afternoon of . . .? Flagg, the children dragged through all the degradation of public exposure. Was it not wiser, nobler, to keep silent, to live in silence with my guilt, with Gloria's? The children were already in bed when Flagg got home. We drank a collins on the porch. He was preoccupied, quiet. A whippoorwill spoke of loneliness. We ate at the kitchen table in candlelight. What do husband and wife talk about when they cannot speak of what is in their hearts? "What did you do today?" "I took the children to the beach. And you?" "I fired Frank. Drinking again." The sort of conversation we used to invent for the benefit of the Faye sisters when we honeymooned in their basement and knew they listened through the heat vent. Eavesdropper talk, we called it and hoped we bored them to death.

After supper Flagg said he had a meeting. The board of fisheries, he said. I wanted to believe him. I thought I did. Yet after he'd gone I started to the telephone to call Sue, whose husband was also on the board. She would know if there really were a meeting. I stopped, my hand on the receiver. But that one furtive impulse showed me. "I have come back to poison your life," and she was succeeding.

I considered it no small feat that when Flagg returned from his "meeting" I asked no questions. But later, lying sleepless and tense in the bed next to his, I could conjure up no pride in this minor conquest. Was this then to be the measure of my days? Constraint? Evasion? Pretense? Shame consumed me. And despair. Involuntarily I started toward the bathroom shelf that held those blessed capsules of sleep. I closed the door, turned on the light. The bottle which only a week ago had scarcely been touched was now a third empty. Was this then to be the measure of my nights? Agony, indecision, and finally a barbiturate sleep? I replaced the bottle on the shelf unopened.

## CHAPTER 19

I had long since abandoned the diary I kept as a child in favor of my poetry scribblings, an all-absorbing project which heretofore I'd always turned to in times of stress. However, I found in the days that followed that I'd lost all powers of concentration. Hours at my desk brought forth nothing but dark thoughts and often an aching head. And this at a time when I was more in need of some private means of self expression than ever before. I turned once more to the simpler, less exacting form of my childhood. Rereading that diary now—and I did not keep it long—I know that I wrote it with far more in mind than the simple recording of those days when, deprived of my favorite muse, I still must write something . . . the creative impulse killing time. No, I see now, if indeed I didn't see then and pretend not, that I wrote nervously, erratically, against a time when I feared I might no longer be able to make myself understood. As though what I wrote would have to serve as explanation . . . as vindication. It was the sort of diary a prisoner might keep before being brought to trial.

*Thursday*

A leaden sky oozing a hot, mistlike rain. Betsy weeps over an infinitesimal splinter, over a lost hair ribbon, over a next-door child who won't play with her. Sarah frets that there is nothing to do, nothing, nothing, nothing! In the kitchen Alvira sings of lost salvations. Every time the telephone or the doorbell rings my heart races. Silly, uninformed heart. Nothing will happen, can happen, until I . . . Oh God, until I what? I drove by the courthouse today. I was twelve the first time my father let me hear him preside over a court. How proudly I walked beside him up the brick walk to the tall, wide door. "In there is order," he said. "That is the true meaning of justice, you know. Order." I drove slowly. I wondered that I'd never noticed how austere, how cold a building it was with its high, thin, curtainless windows. Order. A stark word. A clean word. Is it really Flagg and the children I wish to spare? I pressed my foot hard on the accelerator. I turned the nearest corner. Out of sight, out of mind. I thought I was on my way to market. I found I'd turned yet another corner. I found I'd parked my car at the inn where my father, attended by a manservant, lived out the remainder of his blurred days.

It was early for visitors. He was in bathrobe and slippers, still unshaven, propped in his wheel chair, reading. Or pretending to. Sometimes he sits for hours, his eyes fixed on a page, his hands never moving to turn a page. I wonder of what he dreams? Other times he surprises you with an alert appraisal of a passage that pleases him. I touched his shoulder. He looked up at me. “Good morning, Father. It’s Lucy.” Even so he said, “Catherine?” So hopeful the Catherine it seemed cruel not to let him have his way.

“Not Catherine. Lucy, your daughter.” I pulled up a chair facing his.

“Ah.” His smile was a father’s smile. A benediction. Was that why I’d come? “And how was school today?”

“I no longer go to school, Father. I’m a big girl now. All grown up.”

“Of course,” he said impatiently, as though he’d known all along. “And how is Stark?”

“You mean Flagg?”

“I mean your husband.”

“Fine.”

“And the girls?”

“Just fine.”

“I always felt bad about his mother. I was sure and then I wasn’t sure.” He scowled, trying to remember.

“Flagg’s mother? Mrs. Thorpe?”

“No, no, Mrs. Bartow. What was it I was so sure about, Lucy?” Tired, troubled eyes looked inquiringly into mine.

“I don’t know. She was queer. They had to put her away. . . .”

“That was it. And then she died, and there was no way to make sure. . . .” He was agitated. I longed to probe further. It wouldn’t have been fair.

“You did the right thing. That was long ago. You’ve forgotten. Can I get you some tea?”

I went to market. No list. On purpose. I’d hoped when I got there and looked about a menu would present itself. Rows and rows of limp vegetables, faded fruit. At the meat counter someone was telling Mr. Jarvis that his scales were off. And so are mine, I thought. Way off.

Suddenly around the corner of the cereal counter Miriam and I collide. “I was going to call you as soon as I got home. You and Flagg are coming Saturday, aren’t you? Remember, when I called you Sunday night you weren’t sure.” But Sunday was a thousand years ago. I must have looked it. “The little party we’re having for Gloria,” said Miriam.

Were we going? Of course not, cried my heart. Unthinkable. But if I didn’t go, Gloria would think that my answer . . . my cowed, frightened answer . . . silence and acquiescence and that would be the way of it forever and ever. But I’d not decided, had I? Had I?

“You look frightful,” Miriam said. “It’s this heat. Can I get you water?”

“I probably forgot to put on lipstick. Yes, of course we’ll come. Seven, did you say? Long dress?”

“Not in this heat! Besides, I’m only having eight. Just Gloria’s closest friends.”

Flagg came home early. After supper he suggested chess. I, limp with gratitude, fumbled the queen’s gambit. We drank a collins on the piazza in the moonlight talking feverishly about Sarah’s teeth, his mother’s new hired man, skipping over the silences as you’d skip over a mud puddle wearing your best shoes.

*Friday*

The sun is out again and not as hotly. Flagg kisses me lightly on leaving for Eaton’s Landing, holds me lightly, says, “Must we go to Miriam’s? It’s up to you.” “We must,” I say and can almost pretend it hardly matters except to Miriam.

Sarah, having found something to do, set off to spend the day with Miriam’s Mary. Betsy helped me shell peas and asked me please not to ever, ever die because then who would remember to feed her cat? I begin to feel whole and strong again. The feeling starts in my feet and works upward; when it reaches my head I think, “There is only one right way and that is the way of truth.” I think of the courthouse. I think of order. And then I think of Flagg’s contempt. My children’s bewilderment. And everything comes tumbling down. The telephone rings. Sarah’s voice, sharp with excitement, says that she and Mary are invited to Menlo for lunch. Miriam is taking them. No, I said, and no again. Sarah’s sobs shake through me as though they are my own. Perhaps they are. Miriam speaks reassuringly into the

receiver: “Only a few hours, and I’ll see that they don’t go near the water if that’s what’s worrying you.” I cannot think fast enough to invent reasons. I have no choice.

Flagg calls at noon, nervous, worried; he must have a talk with Matt, his foreman, tonight. “Expect me when you see me. The bottom has fallen out of the fresh-shrimp market.” They must double their canning operations. Or lose thousands of pounds of shrimp.

My book club meets today, but I can’t remember where. Is that because I don’t want to go? The truth is I don’t. I call Laurie Piper to find out. It is at her house, or rather her parents’ house. How is it that she’s never married?

Late to the meeting. Did I imagine the sudden pall in the conversation? I did not imagine that in all the talk around the refreshment table Gloria’s name was not mentioned once. Had there been talk? About Gloria and Flagg? Why should there be now when before . . . and who would know? Ferris? But he wouldn’t tell, not ever, not on his beloved . . . And so, of course, I only imagine.

Bernice Rowe read a paper on Rabelais. Such an unlikely subject for our prim, bespectacled little librarian. I try to listen. I think of Sarah at Menlo and feel faint.

Sarah is at home when I return, starry-eyed and babbling. “Such a beautiful lady, Mummy. Why didn’t you tell me? She says you and she are great friends and that I can come to Menlo any time I want. You’ll just have to take me *soon!* She’s just marvy, Mummy. She let us dress up in some of her Paris clothes. She even let us try on her jewels, and lean down, Mummy, smell . . .” I leaned. I smelled. Gloria’s perfume inflamed my nostrils.

“She lied to you,” I said in a strangled voice. “We are not friends. And you can’t go there, not ever again. Never!”

Sarah’s face is an agonized blur. “But, Mummy . . .” The face comes into focus—wide, astonished eyes, trembling chin, and finally the red flush of anger. “Oh, oh, oh. How can you be so mean? So cruel. You spoil everything!” Sick with remorse, I reached out to comfort her. She whirled out of my grasp, sobbing wildly. “But I’ll go anyhow. You’ll see. Even if I have to walk!” Out of the room she ran and up the stairs. Oh God, what have I done?

Dark came. The moon rose lopsided in the sky. Eight. Nine. Ten. No Flagg. “The bottom has fallen out . . .” I called the plant. No answer. I went to bed and pretended when he finally came that I slept.

“Listen,” Flagg said, climbing into his clothes at the crack of dawn. “I’m not sure I can make Miriam’s shindig tonight. Somewhere in this lazy man’s town I’ve got to uncover a dozen pickers before the boats come in tonight.”

Isn’t this just the reprieve I’ve been looking for? Then why do I say, “Very well, if you’re not here I’ll go alone.” Is it because, reprieve or not, I’ve got to go forward? Forward is the only way to reach the end. Somewhere. And so forward. “Perhaps I could help you round up a few pickers.” Happy thought. Like old times. Meeting the crises together. The unbalanced books. *Miss Pritchard’s* failings. “I could drive over and have a talk with Peaches Brown’s oldest boys. They’re big enough now to be of some use.” For a moment the circle of our marriage closes around us. “And then there’s Alvira’s brother. He’s out of work.” My voice sounds young. I sit up. Flagg is looking at me thoughtfully. Suddenly he flushes. Annoyance? Guilt? Was he, too, looking for a reprieve?

“Never mind. I’ll make out. If Miriam’s party means that much to you I’ll get there.”

“You misunderstand,” I murmur, and suddenly he stoops and puts his arms around me. “Dear Lucy, sweet Lucy.” But there is anguish in his voice, and I know that he has seen Gloria. Or plans to. I twist away from him, bury my head in my pillow against sight, against sound. And when next I look he is gone.

Sarah has not forgiven me. “I have come back to poison your life.” If only I could liken myself to a sealed vial, nothing seeping in, nothing spilling out, containing what I contained. Invulnerable to poisons from without or within.

I took the girls to the beach for a picnic lunch. I left Betsy with the life guard while Sarah and I went hunting for shells. Sarah melted a little in her excitement over a tiny, perfect conch with pearl-like insides.

We stayed at the beach until the sun began to go down. Like doom, that sunset. I’d stretched the day out as long as I could. But now in glaring reds, in fiery purples, the night was almost upon me.

I stood before my closet door fingering the black chiffon—too hot . . . a white full-skirted cotton—too virginal . . . last year’s backless red linen . . . but suppose Gloria wore red? I shut my eyes and blindly chose. Ah, well, the

chiffon is more worldly. In it I felt almost prepared. My mirror failed to concur. My reflection looked back at me, pale and large-eyed. The face of a startled faun. I added more rouge. More lipstick. Ludicrous. I wiped them off again. Flagg came into the room, tossing off clothes as he moved across it to the bathroom, disappeared into the shower. Above the water's roar he told me he'd found the shrimp pickers, that everything was under control.

At the last minute I had a fit of trembling. I sat down on the chair in the front hall. Flagg already held open the screen door. I said, "How can you put me through this?"

"It was your idea that we go. I wondered at the time. I thought . . ."

"That I'd accepted my role graciously? That I was going to be realistic at last? Do you think I don't *know* . . ." I broke off, covering my mouth with the back of my hand before it should do more damage to me. His jaw was hard, his eyes wretched.

"We don't have to go," he said. "Just say the word."

"Oh, but we do." I got up, managed a rueful smile, put my arm through his. "Forgive me," I said, and together and in silence we walked down our front steps and presently up Miriam's wrought-iron ones.

It seemed important that I see Gloria before she saw me. As though there would be some magic protection in this. She too was wearing black—Black linen molded to bosom, to thigh, a silver belt at her waist, silver combs holding black coils of hair close to the proud, bone-perfect head. Her eyes came to rest on me, cool, mocking.

"Hello, Lucy." Her smile a reshaping of the lips. Her eyes swerved to the doorway where Flagg stood talking to Bill Tolles. She glided past me. I watched her hold out her hands to Flagg. Heard the excited ring of her greeting, convincing all but me that this was their first meeting. I witnessed the easy, guileless way they laughed and talked together. Why do they feel no shame? I turned away. Someone put a drink in my hand. I was afraid to drink it. My head already reeled. Miriam drifted toward me. We talked. Or was it Sue? It all blurs, the tasteless cocktail. Later food lifted to the mouth, somehow swallowed. We talked. Tommy Smythe and I, or was it Bill Tolles on my right? Across the table Gloria said to Laurie Piper's Courtney that her stay in France had been divine. The food! The people! Simply divine! I felt her looking at me. "But nothing," she said to Laurie's Courtney, "nothing can keep me away from Menlo forever." Light as light her voice trilling up and down the table. "A toast to Gloria's return." Bill Tolles leaped to his

feet, refilled the wineglasses. I stood with the rest, but I didn't bring the glass to my lips or near them.

Across the table and down, Flagg looked strained, withdrawn. Finally the chairs were pushed back. Coffee on the veranda. Hours and hours of coffee on the veranda. At least it was dark there. No need for the fixed smile, the labored small talk. It was also dark in the car driving home. Flagg took my hand, held it on the seat between us. We drove in silence, my hand in his, permissive, still. But when we got home he didn't follow me up the stairs. And later from my window I saw him pace the length of the sea wall and back, a hunched and restless shadow moving against the water's edge. I went to bed. I fell at once into an exhausted sleep, and when I woke with the sun's light beating against me I saw that the bed next to mine remained undisturbed, the coverlet still neatly drawn up around the plump, untroubled pillow.

### *Sunday*

The town has a Sunday-morning hush about it. Women in wide shaded hats and children starched and freshly combed walk slowly to the heat's rhythm. I too walk slowly, hiding the clamor and turmoil within. Could it have been but a week ago that we sat in this very same pew, serene, united? I steal a sidewise glance at my husband and shiver at the alien, inscrutable profile. Tight jawed, unheeding, Sarah nudges him to awareness as we stand for the hymn.

We had come in separate cars. After church we parted. The girls chose to ride with him. I stopped off at Marty's ice-cream parlor to pick up some ice cream for dinner. Marty's backdrop of our youth, changed now like everything else. Booths have replaced marble-topped tables and spindly metal chairs. In place of the tremendous overhead fan which slowly wound the air about our heads there are dozens of small wall fans and a larger one built into the wall, sucking the air out. The teen-agers remain, languishing for hours over a single milk shake, reading the magazines, and Marty remains, pale and cadaverous, with his boy's twinkle and his boy's smile, lording it over the soda fountain. Today he lords it over Ferris who, in his Sunday clothes, was indulging in a banana split. At home among his flowers and shrubs, at home at Menlo, Mr. Ferris has a certain dignity, an air of authority. Today he looked what he was, a gardener, sun-roughened skin, gnarled, root-stained hands touchingly at odds with coat and tie and white shirt front. Yet still I feared him. A carry-over from the days when he made it

his pleasure to taunt a small boy who had usurped his birthright? Or was it now simply his proximity to Gloria that sent the warning prickles up and down my spine? Made me wish to wait in the shadows until Marty had done with him?

“Just a few days back,” Marty was saying, “someone was asking me why you’d never got yourself hitched . . . a woman someone it was . . . want to know who?”

Ferris shook his head.

“Serious now, don’t you think it’s about time you gave one of these old maids a break?”

“No time for women.”

“That’s not what I hear.”

“You can hear anything in this town.”

“That’s for sure. I hear one time the reason you stay single is from pure stingy . . . another time I hear you can’t look at any likely woman for looking at your boss lady.”

I held my breath, waiting the explosion. There was none. Calm as you please, Ferris said, “Never saw a woman could hold a candle to her yet.” Quietly he pushed away his empty saucer. “But get one thing straight—she may pay me my wages, but we run Menlo together, her and me. Not one move does she make ’out asking me first. A real lady. As fine as they come. Makes me proud having her in the old family place.” He paid Marty and turned. Only then did I see that he was angry. He strode by me and out without seeing me or anyone or anything at all.

Mrs. Thorpe, driven by Peaches Brown’s William, came for two-o’clock dinner. Hadn’t realized how acute the tension between Flagg and me until I tried to conceal it from his mother. Yet in spite of considerable effort on both our parts her glance, troubled and questioning, wandered from one to the other as though she felt vaguely disoriented.

*Monday*

I have wondered how it would come. The challenge. The white glove tossed. The duel arranged. Time. Place. Seconds. It came with the post this morning. It came in a large white envelope bearing the Menlo crest and addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Flagg Thorpe. “Mrs. Gloria Bartow requests the

pleasure of your presence at a ball honoring Mr. and Mrs. William Tolles II on the tenth anniversary of their wedding on Friday, the twenty-first of August, at nine P.M. at Menlo Hall.”

Miriam, one of my oldest, my best friends . . . Bill and Flagg through all the years of our marriage inexorably associated. Our absence would be inexplicable. Inexcusable. No one knew this better than Gloria. “‘Come into my parlor,’ said the spider.” And no matter how I might tear at the silken threads they wound ever tighter, ever closer. Even as I sat holding the hideous summons in a suddenly palsied hand the telephone rang. Miriam.

“You could have knocked me over with a feather, not a word to Bill or to me. First I knew of it was the invitation in the mail this morning. Isn’t she marvelous? I suppose she knew if she told us about it beforehand we’d have felt duty bound to restrain her. You see, we don’t really know her *that* well. I hope she was simply looking for an excuse to have a ball and not feeling obligated because of that little get-together we had for her. Do you remember the first dance we went to at Menlo all those years and years ago? And how scared we were that no one would dance with us?”

“I remember.”

“It will be good to see Menlo all festive and merry again, won’t it? What are you going to wear? Honestly, it’s been so long I can hardly remember what people wear to balls.”

“Nor I.”

“Did I catch you at a bad moment? You sound down.”

“It’s the heat.”

“I shouldn’t expect everyone to be as girlishly delighted as I, but you’ve been to balls at Menlo before, and you know . . .”

“Yes, I know.” I tried to put some joy into the knowing, but all I could think of were long-ago Christmases, of fires burning in all the rooms of Menlo, of smilax boughs and mistletoe, of the young Stark and the young Lucy, of Mrs. Bartow, tall and straight, her white hair piled high, following us with quiet, untroubled eyes.

## CHAPTER 20

The ball! The ball! It must have been a dull summer for most, for no one talked of anything else. Have you heard? She's asked two hundred and fifty people. Have you heard? Two orchestras, strings in the east wing, wind instruments in the west. Miriam went all the way to New York for her gown. Gloria, it was said, had one she'd brought from Paris and saved for just such an occasion. The ball! Like the hurricanes that beset us at this time of year, building up days in advance to a final, lacerating climax, it haunted my every waking hour and trailed me into restless sleep at night.

Flagg could not understand why I must go. I let the invitation lie on the hall table where he could not help but find it. He brought it into the living room that night with the rest of the mail. I watched him read it. Watched him put it down on the sofa beside him with the discarded envelopes and advertisements. He knew that I watched him. He said, "Has it really been that long since Miriam and Bill were married?"

"You'll have to get out your tails," I said. "They will need cleaning if nothing more."

"I've no idea of going." He ripped open a letter from his brother now stationed in Australia. Read it with studied attention.

"I'm afraid we will have to. The Tolleses will never understand if we don't."

"Simple. That's the week I've got to go to Florida."

"Then I shall be forced to go alone."

"My God, Lucy, why?" He crumpled his brother's letter into his pocket. "Can't we stop playing ostrich? You and Gloria aren't friends. Never will be. Why pretend?"

"Pretend? She sent the invitation, didn't she?"

"Sure. A gesture. And a gallant one. Can't you leave it at that?"

"I only know that I must go."

"Just give me one good reason. One."

“I have no good reason,” I said truthfully. “It is just something I feel I must do.”

“Pride? Appearances?” His voice treated the words harshly.

“Perhaps. They still count for something whether you agree or not.”

“You know I can’t let you go alone.” Impatiently he stood up.

“Pride? Appearances?” For the first time in weeks I felt a smile tugging at the corners of my mouth, but so far apart had we grown in this short time that he didn’t notice the smile.

He came and stood over me, compassion, anger, and pain mingled to give him a distorted look. Man on a cross, I thought, suddenly wanting nothing so much as to open my arms to him, hold him, shelter him. And then he was speaking, “Look, Lucy, this is no little brush fire you’re playing with. The rules don’t apply here. The stiff upper lip, the show must go on . . . all the high-flown attitudes and mores that women use to put out the little blazes. This is a full-blown forest fire, and I want you to stay away from it. I don’t want you burned. Do you understand? In my own way I try to protect you. I’m trying to now. Don’t insist on this damn fool face-saving nonsense. You’ll only get hurt.”

“Hurt?” I fought back the crazy laughter that choked me. I made my hands steady in my lap. I met the full blue challenge of his eyes. “You must handle Gloria in your own way,” I said, “and I in mine.”

With a smothered oath he turned and strode out of the room. And with him went all my hard-fought composure. I bent my face into my hands and wept.

“I thought you said Mrs. Bartow wasn’t your friend,” Sarah accused, fingering the invitation. “Are you going to her party?”

“Only because it is being given for the Tolleses to celebrate their anniversary. And the Tolleses are my friends. Dear friends.”

“Does Mrs. Bartow know you don’t like her?”

This had gone far enough. Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings . . . from Sarah to Mary Tolles to Miriam. “I didn’t say I didn’t like her. I only said I didn’t want you to go to Menlo, to impose there, to obligate us in any way, because we aren’t that good friends.” Lies, lies! Sarah’s upturned face, trusting and guileless, wavered before my eyes.

“Then some day you might, just might, let me go out there with Mary? Some day when I’m specially invited?”

“We’ll see.”

“What are you going to wear to the ball?”

“I’m having Mrs. Huff make it.”

“I hope it’s green. You look pretty in green.”

“It is green.”

“And you’ll wear your emeralds?”

“Yes, and green satin shoes on me feet. I’m having the white ones dyed.”

“Oh, you’ll be beautiful.” Sarah sighed.

“I only want to be brave,” I murmured, but that wasn’t true. I wanted to be beautiful, too; I wanted it desperately and hopelessly and more than I’d ever wanted anything foolish in my life.

My hair has a natural wave. I wear it simply and am in the habit of washing and setting it myself, but two days before the ball I made an appointment at Marguerite’s Beauty Shop. I hadn’t realized how relaxing it could be to lie tilted back, head all but submerged in warm water, while expert hands massaged soap into my scalp. I all but drowsed until a voice in the next booth aroused me. The voice wasn’t even vaguely familiar; it was what the voice was saying that caught my attention.

“She says she’s giving it for Lawyer and Mrs. Tolles, for their tenth anniversary, but I declare the way she’s going about it you’d think it was she who’d been married ten years or was about to be . . . two orchestras, mind you, and all the food catered in from Charleston, and the whole place filled with yellow roses, nothing but yellow roses, Mr. Ferris told me himself. Proud as punch because he grew them.” My informant sighed and paused for breath, and another voice which I guessed must be that of the beauty operator who worked on her said:

“Mrs. Bartow was in here the other day. I’d never seen her before, but I knew right away who she was, who she *had* to be.”

“Did you do her hair?”

“She didn’t want much, just a thinning . . . it’s so thick and heavy she has to have it thinned several times a year, she says . . . it’s about the blackest, finest hair I ever worked with.”

“Did she say anything about the ball?” Obviously my informant was not among those invited and must enjoy what she could vicariously.

“Nothing much. There was a woman in the booth next to us that was talking about it, like we are now. I was embarrassed and started to go and hush them up, but she wouldn’t let me. She listened to every word, smiling at herself in the mirror the while as though she and the face in the mirror had a joke together. It gave me a funny feeling.”

“Funny? Why funny?”

“I don’t know why. I just get those feelings sometimes about people, places too. For instance, there’s an empty house I pass on my way to work —”

Not to be diverted, my informant interrupted her, “Is she as beautiful as they say?”

“It’s her eyes, the color, and her hair, too, of course, but it’s her eyes that stop you, make you wonder . . .”

“Strange she’s never married again. Do you suppose she still . . .”

“Could be. Mr. Bartow was a mighty fine man, they say, but still memories don’t make for a warm bed.”

“I’ve heard rumors that there is someone, a car nights, lights at queer hours, nothing sure, not even a name.”

“You can hear anything in this town.”

“I know. Just last week someone was telling me my own daughter was expecting, and the poor girl had a hysterectomy two years ago.”

“Doesn’t that beat all?”

Sarah came running down the front steps to meet me. I did not need to see her eyes to guess at the excitement reflected there. She seemed to quiver with some nervous, secret joy. “I like your hair that way. Was it fun, having all that fuss made over you?” Surely my trip to the beauty parlor could not occasion such delight. I held her away from me, smiling at the flushed and eager face.

“Something wonderful has happened since I’ve been gone, hasn’t it?”

“Yes, yes, it has!” She drew her breath in, held it a moment, her eyes suddenly pleading. “Oh, Mummy, it is wonderful, but I’m scared you won’t

think so, and you've just got to. Please, Mummy."

"I'll try to," I said, but the moment I'd said it I knew I wouldn't. I knew, I knew what was coming, not the form it would take, but the essence I knew. Sarah clutched my hand and fell into step beside me.

"You knew, didn't you," she said roundaboutly, "that Mary Tolles is going to the ball, that Mrs. Bartow has asked her to help serve?"

"No, I didn't know." The form took shape.

"Well, anyway, Mary is going, and this afternoon Mrs. Bartow telephoned and asked if I could come too, with Mary, and I've got to go; you've got to let me. It's the only chance I'll have to see a real ball until I'm grown up and maybe not even then . . . and Mrs. Bartow was so nice. She said she knew if you'd ever been a little girl you'd understand how important it was to let me go. She said . . ."

We reached the door; Sarah held it open. I couldn't meet the hope in her eyes, the entreaty. "It is out of the question," I said and walked quickly past her. "It is out of the question, and Mrs. Bartow knows it. She should never have asked you." Grown-up talk. Meaningless. Incomprehensible. "Darling"—I turned, tried to put an arm around the thin, angry shoulders—"I don't approve of children at adult parties. I can understand Miriam's making an exception in this case, because the party is being given for them, their anniversary, but there is no excuse for her asking you . . ."

"You're being mean, mean, mean!" Sarah ducked from under my protective arm. "It's just because you don't like Mrs. Bartow. Isn't it? Isn't it?"

If I'd had any doubt as to Gloria's intent it was clear to me now, as clear as the anger, the contempt, the hurt tears in my daughter's eyes.

"It is because you are a child of eight, and I will not have you attending adult balls, whatever the reason."

"But I won't be going to it, I'll just be helping. I only want to watch, to see . . ." Her voice was thick with tears. "Please just this once, and I'll never ask to go again!"

At that moment I'd have given half of heaven to be able to give in. "No," I said, and "No!" again.

"I'll never forgive you," Sarah said. "Never in all my life," she said and rushed past me and up the stairs to her room. The door slammed shut behind her, and seconds afterward I heard the heartbroken sound of her crying.

She was still shut away supperless in her room when Flagg got in. We had come to rely heavily on the presence of the children, and it was with annoyance almost that Flagg, not finding her at once, said, "Isn't it early for Sarah to be in bed?"

I told him that as far as I knew she was not in bed. I said, "She is angry with me." To compose myself after the scene with Sarah I'd got out my mending basket. Jabbing a needle into a recalcitrant hem, I said, "Gloria has asked her to come to the ball with Mary Tolles . . . to help serve, she said. I, of course, told Sarah it was out of the question. Sarah, of course, doesn't understand." I withdrew the needle, sent it stabbing again.

"I'm not sure I understand either," Flagg said after a moment. "Did you have to disappoint the child?"

Astonished, outraged, I looked at him. "Of course I had to. I will not have her used as a pawn. I will not have her drawn in. Surely you feel the same."

"A pawn? Drawn in? Just because she is allowed a look-in at the party. What did you tell her?"

"That I disapproved . . . her age . . . the lateness of the hour, and I do disapprove . . ."

"But you let her stay up New Year's Eve."

"That was different . . . but what's the use in arguing? I'm sure Gloria knew that we would. She only asked her to make trouble."

I sounded like a shrew. For answer Flagg turned and left the room. I heard him go up the stairs. Heard a door open, a door close. The door to Sarah's room? I ripped out the crooked hem and started it over again.

They came downstairs presently, the two of them, hand in hand. Sarah, swollen-eyed, grim about the mouth, Flagg pretending to a cheerfulness he could not possibly feel. What had happened up there? Had he flouted me? Were he and Sarah now united against me? "I have come back to poison your life!" Was this, then, the lethal dose?

"We've a bargain to make," Flagg said, his arm about Sarah, and I unconsciously braced myself. "If Sarah is understanding and a good sport about not going to the party, will we promise to wake her when we come in and tell her about it?"

"And bring refreshments too?" Sarah added. "A feast, a midnight feast?"

“Oh yes,” I said. “Yes indeed . . . a midnight feast.”

“That’s a promise?” Sarah said warily.

“A promise,” I confirmed gladly, little guessing that it was the first promise I’d ever made her that I would break. Little knowing that when the time came I’d have no memory for promises, my own or anyone else’s.

## CHAPTER 21

The ball! The ball! Dawn came slowly that morning. I know, because I woke with the first ocher light rimming the horizon. I lay and watched a heat-corroded sun take possession of a pale and tired sky. Not a cloud anywhere and yet the heavy feel of moisture in the air, an invisible fog hot against the skin, a thickness in the lungs. In the bed next to mine Flagg still slept, flat on his stomach, one arm hugging the pillow, the clear-boned profile, forehead, cheek, and chin, all that was revealed to me. In sleep there was youth and sweetness in that profile. The day's demands would soon impose the man's look, the furrowed wisdom, the needed strength, but for this moment I cherished the illusion of innocence. I even imagined that were I to creep, silken quiet, from my bed to his the eyes he opened to mine would light with tenderness. But as I watched he moved, turned on his back, flung the pillowed arm upward across his eyes. "Gloria!" he moaned. His lips did not move, or his eyelids. It mattered not that there'd been only torment in the utterance; Gloria had invaded our room. I leaped up and hustled into my clothes, my eyes deliberately avoiding the shimmering yards of green chiffon that Mrs. Huff had so proudly fashioned into a gown for me. Even as I pretended not to see it my mind counted the wretched hours until I should be putting it on. Behind me Flagg woke up and in one motion was out of bed and in front of the window stretching, inhaling deeply, gauging with eyes and nostrils the day's portent. How I marveled at and today all but hated the resilience, the vitality, that made each and every day new to him. Yet had I not used to feel the same? Out of the moment's bitterness I said harshly:

"You were dreaming!"

"Was I? I never remember. A sullen day out there; I'm afraid the shrimp won't like it." He turned back to the room and began hurriedly to dress. "Did I tell you that next season I'll have seven boats afloat? A man in Norfolk, a boat builder, is selling out . . . Seven!" He paused a moment to gaze out at the sound as though almost he could see them there, seven abreast, his fleet! Lucky for Gloria, I thought, that it was I who was hostage to his choice and not Eaton's Landing! I doubted that Gloria knew that. Or that she would be likely to forgive him should she ever find it out.

We had not mentioned the ball since the evening of Sarah's tantrum, nor did I remind him this morning when, after a hasty breakfast, he left for Eaton's Landing. I was sure he'd not forgotten. And it was not a subject I could broach with any ease. Yet when eight o'clock that evening came and went and there was no sign of him, I wondered if he had indeed forgotten. Pride would not let me call the plant. It occurred to me his absence might be deliberate. An affirmation of the stand he'd taken. Yet he'd said he'd not let me go alone. Perhaps he didn't believe that I really would and took this means to prove it. I had a lonely bath. I put on the green chiffon, the green satin slippers, and I hung the emeralds about my neck though my hands trembled so I had difficulty with the clasp.

Sarah and Betsy came in to view the final effect. "You look like Snow White," said Betsy, "only green."

"You need more lipstick," said Sarah, "and not so much powder." I had no powder on and more lipstick than I ever wore.

Behind them Alvira, who was staying the night with the children, said, "What she needs is a cup of beef soup. She didn't touch her dinner."

"To bed, all of you," I said, feeling that I must look unutterably drab.

At a quarter to nine Flagg appeared. He was wearing T shirt and dungarees. "I've been out to sea. I did some thinking." He strode across the room to me. He put his hands on my shoulders, but there was nothing tender in his grip; harsh and urgent it was. "I am not going to the ball," he said, "and neither are you."

For one stunned moment I thought, perhaps, perhaps . . . I said, "What has happened?"

"Nothing." He shook his head impatiently. "We aren't going, that's all. I'm fed up with sham. Hypocrisy. Of juggling words and mincing emotions for the benefit of a lot of gaping people. That's what it'll be tonight. All of us puppets on a string. What do you expect to prove?" His fingers bit into my shoulders painfully. I shook free of them, anger sweeping over and through me.

"I expect to prove that I've not given up, capitulated, died of Gloria's poison. When will you ever wake up? See? This ball isn't for Miriam and Bill. She's giving it for herself. For Gloria Bartow's triumphant return to Menlo and the arms of her lover. Oh, she'll have toasts to drink tonight." Mockingly I raised my hand, my fingers curled around an imaginary goblet. "To Stark Bartow's death!" I lifted my hand to my lips. "To she who killed

him!” “To Lucy Thorpe, who knows and dares not tell!” “To all the dark and ugly secrets between us.” “To Flagg who . . .” Flagg’s hand held to my mouth stopped me.

“Have you gone mad?”

“Yes, yes, mad!” I breathed. “But it’s time you heard of my madness. And hers. It’s time you chose between the two.” Dimly through my rage I knew that I was about to destroy not Gloria but myself. I could not stop. Did not want to. “You think Gloria left Menlo for love of you and for love of you returned?” My voice shook with scorn. “She left because I forced her to. I told her if she did not I would tell how Stark had died and why. I was there that day. They quarreled; she pushed him. She killed him. It was murder! That is why she left Menlo. The only reason!”

“I don’t believe you,” Flagg said. “Stark died long before she went away.”

“Nor did I know then how he’d died. When I did know it was only a guess. Things added up, fell into place. I didn’t let Gloria know it was only a guess. She thinks I saw it all . . .”

“You were at Menlo that day?” He looked pleased, as though he’d at last found the flaw in my story. “You were there and told no one?”

“I heard them quarreling. I heard Stark fall. When I opened the door he was lying there. Gloria was running down the stairs. Stark said it was an accident. He said it over and over. He asked me to tell no one that I was there. He made me promise. I thought it was because he didn’t want people to know they’d quarreled. I thought—oh, it’s hard to remember what I did think, but I promised. I didn’t know then that he would die. After he died I felt I must honor my promise. I didn’t know he was only trying to shield Gloria.”

“If what you say is true,” Flagg said evenly, “then how did Gloria dare to come back?” Though he was still the dubious inquisitor, I could see that, little as he wanted to, he was beginning to believe me.

“She didn’t dare. She came because she couldn’t help herself. She can’t live away from Menlo. You know that. She came back prepared to stand trial if need be, only I was to stand trial with her, an accessory after the fact, withholding evidence, blackmail. She came here to the house a few days after she got back and put her cards on the table. So now perhaps you see why I must go to the ball tonight. I can’t stay cowering at home like a cornered rat. Even if that is what I am.” I began gathering comb and

compact together. I put them in my evening bag. Flagg did not move or speak. I walked blindly past him. At the stairs I looked back. He was still standing where I'd left him, mute, motionless, and on his face a look of such stunned despair it was all I could do to turn and fumble my way down the stairs and out to the car.

I drove very slowly. I was too numb to do otherwise. In the limp aftermath of spent emotion the scene behind me seemed unreal. A play viewed from the wings—*The End of Love*, starring Lucinda and Flagg Thorpe. As soon as I turned off the causeway and into the avenue I could see the lights of Menlo reflected in the sky ahead. I rode through the avenue and out into a galaxy of light. Wrought-iron lanterns kept a light-and-shadow watch over lawns and gardens, and towering up out of the misted glow, the lights of Menlo Hall shone all around and about.

I wanted to remain a moment in the car to comb my hair, adjust my lipstick, to swallow the salt taste of unshed tears, but an attendant was at my window before I'd scarcely stopped.

“Not here, ma'am. I'll park it for you.” I was, of course, late. But the receiving line had not yet dissolved. Miriam, Bill Tolles took my hand. Before they could ask I said:

“Flagg got detained. That's why I'm late. I waited . . . but I was afraid the party would be over, and so I came . . . He'll be along soon, I'm sure.” I smiled; I looked directly, still smiling, at Gloria. She was wearing not yellow, as I'd been led to believe, but green—a shimmering, iridescent green that made mine pale and dull in contrast. I detected a flicker of disappointment in the downward curve of her mouth at the news of Flagg's tardiness, but nothing could dim the shining triumph in her eyes as she greeted me. She stood before the long, gilt-edged mirror, and on her hair she wore the tiara that I had first seen so many years, so many deaths ago, in the kitchen of the apartment on Palm Street. The seed pearls and diamond chips which had looked so grand then should by all rights have now appeared cheap and tawdry alongside the diamonds about the neck, the multi-jeweled bracelets on her arms. They didn't. Her head was held too proudly for that. Simply by wearing the tiara she endowed it with a value it would occur to no one to question.

“This must be like old times for you, Lucy, but I doubt if even you've seen Menlo so beautiful.” Over my head her eyes wandered with rapturous satisfaction up the wide, the treacherous, stairway. How could she look upon this without fear or sorrow? And with no shadow of regret? The balustrades,

I saw now, were twined with yellow roses, up, up to the great arched window at the landing, laced criss-cross with yellow roses. From the east wing came the sound of violins, from the west the bleating of horns. I felt all at once that I was smothering in yellow roses, in the disparate sound of music. I thought of the long-ago high, cool, empty hall, of Stark's barren, book-lined room, of tea in the library and Mrs. Bartow's long, pale hands with their single ring moving with such accurate delicacy among the silver urns.

"I have seen it far more beautiful than you could ever imagine." But I must not have spoken aloud for Gloria was saying:

"I have Mr. Ferris to thank for the rose bower."

"I must congratulate him," I said wryly. "Is he here tonight?"

"Here? Heavens, no. He doesn't own evening clothes, much less know how to wear them."

"I just thought you might have found some way to fit him in. I'm sure he'd have been pleased."

"It never occurred to me," Gloria said crisply. "And I can't imagine why it should have occurred to you. Though he may think he owns Menlo, he is, for all his high and mighty ways, only the gardener and would have been sent packing by the Bartows long since if it hadn't been for me."

What I noticed first was the extreme and awkward silence of first Bill and then Miriam. Gloria must have noticed, too, for we turned at the same time and there, right beside us, stood Ferris. He held a letter in his hand; he held it out to Gloria.

"This came special delivery. They left it at my place." There was nothing in the slow, guttural voice, nothing in the eyes beneath their hooded lids to tell us if he'd heard. Or not heard. I hoped I imagined the tremor in the hand that proffered the letter. Flushing, Gloria took it from him.

"Now that you're here," she said lightly, gaily, all coaxing smiles, "why don't you poke about and see what you can see . . ."

"It's late. Thank you just the same." With a curt nod he departed.

"I'm afraid he heard you," Miriam said unhappily.

"Of course he didn't." Gloria shrugged. "If he had, he'd have burst into tears on the spot. He's terribly proud, and he adores me."

“Come,” Bill Tolles said and took my arm. “Let’s go and find you a partner. Shall it be strings or horns? East wing or west?”

“Wherever partners abound.”

“There are plenty of those. Gloria saw to that. Strings are my choice. Does that date me?” As we walked toward the music, the cacophony of voices and laughter, we had to speak louder.

“It’s being married for ten years that dates you. By the way, congratulations . . .”

“It doesn’t seem that long, does it?”

“Yes and no.”

“I know what you mean. When two people are happy together, you feel as though you’ve known each other forever and at the same time as though you’d met only yesterday.”

I said nothing, but apparently he took my silence for agreement, for in a moment he said, “It’s all a matter of luck, this marriage business, the right woman, the right man, and then right for each other. You and Flagg, Miriam and I, just luck . . .”

We had reached the entrance to the conservatory, or what had once been a conservatory, and I was happy that further conversation was virtually impossible. Here, as in the hallway, yellow roses climbed the walls, traced window ledges, wreathed the dais on which the orchestra sat. With an appraising glance at the stag line Bill led me onto the floor. They were playing the “Blue Danube.” I closed my eyes and was once more back in Miss Hughes’s dancing class. One, two, three, one, two, three, I was young again and filled with hope, and in a moment, as if this were indeed Miss Hughes’s, someone tapped Bill on the shoulder, and I looked up into the round, pink face of Charlie Drew. Rounder now, and pinker, and the gold curls which he’d so hated giving way to baldness, but the illusion was preserved, and I clung to it. Presently Charlie Drew gave way to Judge Roberts, stubble gray hair and a booming voice familiar to me since he used to come to see my father bringing, concealed in his pipe-infested pockets, a lollipop or stick of gum for “Lucy Locket.” I did not mind that I was left on his hands for rather a long time. My next partner was a stranger to me, a square, ruddy young man with a rather too easy smile and a jocular manner. “Bob Larson,” he introduced himself. “And don’t try to place me. I’m not from around here. Imported from New York.”

“A friend of Gloria’s?”

“I try to be.” He grinned, winked. “She’s a hard girl to be friends with. Cold as ice, but you never quite believe it. Met her in Europe. I happened to be in Charleston yesterday and called . . . *ipso facto*, here I am.”

“Are you staying here in Royal Bay?”

“No indeedy. Small towns give me claustrophobia.”

We found little else to talk about. I was surprised when, having been relieved of me, he returned after a few dances and cut in again. I was surprised and puzzled. There was nothing suggestive of interest in his manner toward me. He held me loosely, scarcely looking at me. I occasionally caught him scanning the room with a restless, anxious eye as though he looked for someone who had not yet arrived. Finally, after the third dance, I said:

“Wouldn’t you like to be introduced to some of our local belles? Just pick one, and I’ll see to it that you meet her.”

“No. Thanks just the same. Gloria asked me to look after you until your husband comes. Her word is my command!” He made a mock bow.

“But he isn’t coming,” I blurted. “Besides, you’ve more than done your duty, and I’ve enjoyed it. Next time someone cuts in, run along and widen your horizons.”

But no one cut in. One dance, two, three. I danced mechanically, wondering the purpose of Gloria’s concern for me. The orchestra was playing a Hungarian dance, fast, exciting, when across the room I saw them. Gloria and Flagg, Gloria and Flagg, whirling, whirling, seemingly oblivious of the couples who moved out of their path, oblivious of the admiring glances, the sighs that followed them. Even I, caught off guard, could not help but catch my breath at the grace, the beauty, the compelling force of them.

I’d no idea how long Flagg might have been there. A minute? An hour? What mattered it how long? He had come, and he had not tried to find me. The meaning was clear enough. He had made his choice. My feet were lead, my arms limp. In all fairness to my long-suffering partner I owed it to him to tell him of my husband’s arrival, but I could not have spoken if my life had depended on it. The dance was ended. Another, a slower one, begun. Gloria and Flagg were lost to me in the sea of swaying couples. Lost to me, lost to me, lost to me . . . Like some wallflower schoolgirl I murmured something about the powder room and made my faint, giddy way through the mass of silks and satins, the broadcloth, the white starched shirt fronts, and across

the hall and down it to the closet under the stairs which Mrs. Bartow had had converted into a small washroom. I knew I would be alone here. Few knew of it. Those women wishing to repair their faces would be sent upstairs to one of the guest rooms where a maid would be in attendance.

I turned on the one dim light over the washbasin and began, automatically, to wash my hands. Having had gloves on all evening, they scarcely needed it, but it was for this purpose that I'd always been sent here after riding or romping in the kennels with Stark. And so I washed my hands. And then, for some reason, I washed my face; I replaced the scrubbed-off powder and lipstick; I combed my hair. Abruptly there was nothing more to do. Except to go home, of course. I wondered that I'd not thought of it before. I cracked the door cautiously, wanting to slip out unseen, back through the kitchen and out the kitchen door.

Across the hall and to my left a door opened into the small gold drawing room that had been Mrs. Bartow's favorite. Gloria and Flagg at that moment were walking through it. I heard the tinkle of Gloria's muted laughter, for a moment wafted the heavy, pungent odor of her perfume, and then the door closed behind them.

Farther down the hall and to the right was another door that went into the library. Between the two rooms, unless someone had closed the huge panel-like double doors that divided them, hung only heavy velvet curtains concealing but not separating one room from the other—the same curtains behind which Stark's redheaded friend and I had exchanged a kiss while playing at charades. Passing the library door on my way out, I saw that it was dark in there except for the outside lamps whose light filtered mistily through the many-paned windows. It was dark in there and, but for the murmur of voices in the drawing room beyond, silent. I stood transfixed by the distant, muffled sound of those voices. Did they speak of love, those two? Of the future? Their future? My future, one and the same! My future! I had a right to know, didn't I? Hardly hesitating at all, I stole through the library door. What sort of woman are you, I asked myself, that creeps and listens about? But I no longer knew what sort of a woman. I no longer cared. I moved softly across the room to where the curtains hung. So thick and many-folded were they no ray of light from the drawing room penetrated. I leaned, flaccid and spent, against the wainscoting.

"I knew you'd come," Gloria said. "Even though I guessed from the look of Lucy that you didn't plan to. Have you two quarreled?"

"No."

“But you are angry. I’ve never seen you so angry!”

“More than angry!”

“With me? Whatever about? For heaven’s sake, sit down. Here. Beside me.”

So Gloria must be sitting. Undoubtedly on the little gold love seat before the coal fire. I could all but see the shimmer of green satin against gold brocade, the proud head with its raven crest, tilted upward coaxingly. But Flagg apparently did not comply, for in a moment she said crossly:

“Stop looking at me like that. What in God’s name has come over you?”

“The truth. The ugly, stinking truth.” Rage gave his voice a frightening vibrance. Sharply Gloria caught her breath, slowly let it out. “Lucy’s behind this! What is it? What lies has she told you?”

“Lucy doesn’t lie. You know that as well as I.”

“Any woman lies when she’s afraid. All right, supposing I did trip Stark. It was still an accident. You must know I’d never . . .”

“I know you’ve got a murderous temper,” Flagg interrupted, “but it’s not Stark I’m concerned about now. It’s Lucy. What you’re trying to do to her.”

“Since when this touching devotion to Lucy?”

“Since always and you damned well know it.”

“I never believed it. Not really. I still don’t. Surely you must have known that when two women love the same man one of them is bound to be destroyed.”

“No, I didn’t. Not until tonight. Tonight I knew and I’m here to tell you it is not to be Lucy.”

“Who then?”

“Not Lucy.”

“Then what about me? What’s to become of me?”

“You’ll survive. You always do.”

“Not without you, not if you leave me . . .”

“I have left you. Hours ago.”

“A few hours and you think you can forget me . . . wipe out the days, the nights, the years . . .” There was a sound of tears in her voice. “How? How?”

I've not changed. I'm still Gloria. Your Gloria."

"Menlo's Gloria." Heavy, purposeful feet moved past the curtain where I crouched.

"No! It's only you I love, have always loved, no one else ever . . . You mustn't go, not now, not like this with hate in your eyes and blackness in your heart. Take me in your arms. Kiss me! I dare you kiss me!"

I held my breath. I held it until I felt my chest would burst and my heart come tumbling out, but I heard no sound, no movement, no step across the room to where she sat, no rustle of silks to where he stood. And then in a voice that rang with despair Gloria cried, "I've begun to hate you. I have. I have."

I now heard her rise, stride across the room. "You can't do this to me. You can't. I'll see you in hell first. You *and* your precious Lucy . . ." Suddenly there was a sharp staccato sound of a slap. And then silence. And then Gloria's voice, high and shrill, "Get out of here! I never want to see you again. Never!"

I heard the sound of footsteps, firm, resolute, male. I heard the door open into the hall.

"Do you know where *I* want to go when I die?" Gloria's voice came from the window end of the room.

"To Menlo, of course." Flagg's voice from the door.

"No! No! Nor to heaven either! I want to go back to an apartment on Palm Street. I want to go back to a time before I ever met Lucy Fenwick or laid eyes on Menlo. And I want to stay there for all eternity!"

"I only wish I could take you there," he said, and in a moment I heard him walking rapidly down the hall.

Much as I longed to leave my place behind the curtain, I dared not move. Without Flagg's presence to distract her Gloria might easily hear me. I stayed. The rustle of silk was a moving sound now, back and forth within feet of where I stood, electric, vibrant. The curtains almost seemed to move as she passed, back and forth, up and down. Once she moaned. Twice she said, "No! No!" in a strangled whisper. Finally she moved to the door. Opened it. Went out, leaving it open. I waited a few minutes, and then I, too, went out into the hallway.

There were people moving about, but the orchestra was silent and the only swell of voices came from the dining room. I hastened down the

hallway past the great mirror, stripped now of Gloria's reflection, and toward the front door. Once before I'd tried to leave this house unnoticed only to encounter Stark. Tonight as I reached the front door Flagg called to me from the cloakroom to the right of it.

"I've been looking for you," he said. He was so white, so drawn, that the bright copper gold of his hair seemed out of place, an outrageous wig worn for bravado's sake. "I decided to come after all."

"I know. I saw you dancing with Gloria."

"I didn't see you. Are you leaving now? I'll follow you in my car."

"Perhaps that would be best. I'm not too good at night driving."

He looked at me oddly, surprised, I suppose, by my serenity. We walked across the lawn to my car.

"Mine is on the other side of the house. Wait for me at the gate." He opened the door, helped me in, and then stood for a moment uncertainly at the car window. This was the moment to tell him if I ever were going to that I knew what he was thinking, what he was feeling, that I knew what had happened tonight. I twisted my gloves in my lap, turning the decision over in my mind. It was not shame that made me irresolute, though God knows I felt shame. Nor was it fear of his contempt. Surely he'd learned enough harsh truths about me tonight not to recoil at another. But what had happened tonight belonged to him and to Gloria. Though I'd intruded, it would still belong to him if he did not know that I had. I felt I owed him that.

"Don't drive too fast," he said, and then hurriedly, as though he wanted it over and done and never spoken of again, he said, "Thank you for loving me. You've nothing more to fear from Gloria." Swiftly he turned and strode away to his car. I sat staring after him. Nothing more to fear from Gloria? Nothing to fear from tide or wind or rain when the storm is unleashed? "I'll see you in hell first," she'd told him. I started the car. I turned it around. The lights, the myriad lights of Menlo, were behind me. A mere flicker in the rear-view mirror.

## CHAPTER 22

I don't know who was the more exhausted, Flagg or I. We fell into our separate beds minutes after we got home and I, at least, into the first deep, dreamless sleep I'd known in weeks. I didn't hear the telephone, but Flagg must have. I woke abruptly, reluctantly, to the overhead light glaring down in my eyes. Flagg was clamoring into his clothes. There was an air of urgency in his haste, an alarming harshness in the light that beamed so relentlessly into my eyes.

"What is it?" I murmured dazedly.

"There's a fire. Matt just called." He hitched the belt that held up his trousers, snatched a shirt from the bureau drawer.

"A fire? Where?"

"At Eaton's Landing. The dock. But it's out of control." He threw his arms into the shirt and, buttoning it, made for the door.

"Wait!" I cried, awake at last. "I'm coming with you."

"What about the children?"

"Alvira's here."

"No, it's no place for you." He was out the door. "I'll call you, let you know . . ."

I sat on the side of my bed still only half comprehending and heard the front door bang shut, heard his car, gears stripping, tear off down the street. Eaton's Landing on fire! The years of labor, the passionate endeavor up in flames? The symbol of Flagg's asserted right to be himself. The monumental proof of that conviction. Burning? Hurrying, scurrying, I could find nothing that I wanted. Finally wearing shorts and a shirt of Flagg's, the tail tied about my waist, I climbed into my car. I tried not to think of the inadequacies of the Royal Bay Fire Department, a volunteer organization ill equipped to deal with any emergency beyond the city limits. Miles from the landing I could see the bright, horrendous stain against the sky. I shivered and pressed my foot hard to the accelerator.

The approach to the landing is wooded, and though the sky all about me was now aglow, I could see nothing of what was taking place until I was

upon it, and then I jerked the car to a stop and stared. At the end of the dock *Miss Pritchard*, and the light from the flames still proclaimed her that, like some clumsy, many-faceted torch, burned skyward. At her side the dock was burning and the unloading shed too. But it was *Miss Pritchard* wreathed in flame that tore at my heart, brought quick, helpless tears to my eyes. Old and battered ship of fortune. Ours. I got out of the car and searched the swarm of busy, shouting men for Flagg. I did not see him. I saw *Miss Pritchard* suddenly keel to her side with a great spitting of flame and water. I saw the shed cave in, heard the thunder of falling timber. I saw the pitifully inadequate hoses pulled back. I saw the blackened, angry faces of men fighting a fruitless war. So far the packing house was safe. The motionless August air was in its favor. But the heat from docks and shed was dangerously close. The men had begun to spray the sides of the packing house with a protective coat. I went up to one of them.

“Give me something to do,” I begged. “I’ve got to help.” I doubt if he heard me above the hissing water, the crackling fire.

“Out of the way, ma’am,” he shouted. “Stay back!”

“But I’ve got to help. I’ve got to!”

“Pray!” he shouted. “Pray for rain.”

I didn’t pray. I went inside the packing house. It was hot and smoke-filled but in no immediate danger. I knew where the books and ledgers were kept. The fire’s light guided me to them. They were heavy, those books. I could carry only one at a time. I don’t know how many trips I made. A dozen? Two? On one of them I encountered Flagg. He was running past me, holding a chemical extinguisher in his arms. His eyes were red, rimmed with soot. The sight of me under my load of books, soot stained as he by now, did not slow him, but his mouth twisted in a smile of recognition. It was not the gayest smile in the world, but fleetingly it joined us together, closer than we’d been in many weeks.

I was carrying the last of the ledgers to my car when I felt a gust of wind against my burning cheeks and looked at the sky. A cloud blacker than the night hung right above us, and even as I looked a drop of rain, another, another, splattered my upturned face. More wind, a harder gust, and in a few minutes a sheet of wind-driven rain swept in from the west, blinding, total. Behind me the fire fighters let out a cry of exaltation. I turned and ran back to the shelter of the packing house. Others tumbled in behind me. They filled the doors and windows, watching the miracle and talking in voices pitched high with relief.

“Thorpe must be living right is all I can say!”

“Another ten minutes, and it would have been all over but the insurance, and there’s not too much of that, I hear.”

“God, did you see the way that shed crumbled?”

“It started on *Miss Pritchard*, went from there to the dock.”

“How?”

“They say kerosene was spilled all over the place. You could smell it for a while.”

“They say someone poured kerosene and lit a match . . .”

I tugged at this one’s arm. He turned. It was Marty, ice-cream-parlor Marty, looking worn and grubby but somehow more the man than I ever remembered him.

“Are you saying this fire was set?”

“What are you doing here?” he admonished, looking surprised.

“You were talking about how the fire started. Did you say it was set?”

“It’s not up to me to say anything, ma’am, but that is the talk.”

Thunder had followed the rain, making further conversation difficult. A flash of lightning showed me Flagg standing at one of the doorways. Some of the men had flashlights; using these as steppingstones, I picked my way to his side. He seemed unaware of the noise of the storm, of the voices of the men around him. He stared out at the black, steaming ruin of docks and shed, the tears running unheeded down his face. I felt for his hand.

“Thank God for the rain,” he said. “Thank God for that.”

“And thank God there was only one boat at the dock.” I couldn’t bring myself to name her, our lost lady.

“Yes,” he said. “But the only one I can’t replace.”

“I know,” I said.

“They say the fire started with her, but I don’t believe it. Kerosene, they said, but there hasn’t been any of that aboard since we put in the gas burner.”

“There is a rumor that the fire was set.”

“Set? I don’t have that kind of enemies.” He laughed shortly. “People get crazy ideas, don’t they?”

“Yes,” I murmured. I had begun to get a few crazy ideas myself, but I would not mention them. He’d had enough for one day. We all had.

“Thanks for coming,” he said. “The rain’s letting up—might as well go. Nothing more to do and, thank God, nothing more to see.”

We left his car there, and he drove us home in mine. The rain had stopped, and the sun was rising in the east. Too tired for speech, we drove in silence. There was a truck parked on the street in front of the house. It looked vaguely familiar, but the mental effort of trying to place its owner was more than I wished to undertake. Only after we got out of the car and started toward our front steps did I see that a man sat hunched on the bottom step, holding his head in his hands as though he were sick. As we approached he slowly lifted his head, and we saw that it was Ferris. Ferris, haggard and old and strangely lifeless.

“I’ve got to see you. Talk to you. You’ve got to help me.” His hooded eyes were fixed on Flagg. Only his lips moved.

“Can’t it wait?” Flagg said wearily. “It’s been quite a night!”

“I know. You’ve got to help me. You know her. You know her root and branch. You can tell them how it was. How it couldn’t be helped.” He spoke in a monotone; his eyes beneath their hooded lids appeared dazed, opaque. Looking into them was much like trying to look into a moonstone.

“See here,” Flagg said. “Have you been drinking?”

“I don’t drink!” For a moment his voice came alive. “And I can get a dozen witnesses to prove it.”

“Then what the hell is this all about?” Flagg said. And added, his eyes suddenly bright and hard, “Does it have to do with the fire tonight? The fire at Eaton’s Landing?”

“It started with that . . .”

“Come inside,” Flagg said curtly. “We can talk better there.”

Not only did Ferris look old, he seemed to have difficulty getting to his feet, and as he shuffled up the steps behind us, I could hear his labored breathing.

Because it offered more privacy than any other place, we went into the room that we still call the sewing room, though it’s not been used for that since my mother’s death.

Flagg, exhausted, sank into the leather armchair, I onto the small ottoman at his feet. Ferris remained standing until Flagg, with a wave of his hand, indicated a chair opposite us, and then he let himself down cautiously, sitting stiffly hunched forward, arms folded tensely across his knees.

“What about the fire?” Flagg said abruptly.

“That was only the start of it . . . there’s worse.”

“It’s the fire I want to hear about,” Flagg insisted.

“You’ll help me? You’ll explain to them?”

“Sure. Sure.” Impatiently Flagg kneaded at his forehead with restless fingers.

“Then I’d best begin at the start and tell it straight through. If I can just think right, remember right. Some of it’s hazy. My head echoes like it has a hammer to it. Well, I guess it didn’t rightly start with the fire, but I’ll come to that; in a minute I’ll come to it. It started with me hearing what Mrs. Bartow said about me to your wife here. She can tell you about that well as I. All this time I think I rate high with her. I think she needs me, can’t get along without me, has respect for me. I think in a way Menlo belongs to the both of us, her in her way, me in mine, and no argument from the either of us. But she told your wife and Mr. and Mrs. Tolles—they heard it, too—she told them . . .” He took a deep breath as though he had need for air. “She said. ‘He thinks he owns the place, but for all his high and mighty ways he’s just the gardener.’” He paused a moment, took another deep breath which might have been a sigh.

“Maybe if when she saw me standing there she’d gone right on being hoity and mean I could have stood it. Mad she was, I’d think, and likely to get over it, but soon as she saw me she turned all smiles and coaxing ways like she always is. Just like she always is with me. It went right through me, clean through me. I went back to my cabin and tried to get it out of my mind, but it stuck like glue. It was still sticking when she called me. Late it was. Everybody had left and all the lights still on. Blazing. Right ghostly, all those lights and no people. She called me and told me to come up to the house right off. I thought maybe she knew what she’d done and was sorry for it and wanting to tell me. But when I got there I could see it wasn’t that on her mind. She was real excited. Never seen her like that, eyes big as dollars and cheeks red as carnations. ‘You’ve got to help me,’ she said, and without telling me another thing she takes me down to the cellar. ‘I want you to load these on the truck,’ she says, and she points to some old kerosene

vats we keep to use in the lowland against the mosquitoes when they're hatchin'."

At this juncture I could not bear to look at Flagg. But I heard his quick, sharp intake of breath.

"I asked her where she was taking all that kerosene this time of night, but she never so much as answered; she just hoisted her own shoulders to one of the vats and starts it rolling to the stairs. I wasn't in a mind to give her help, but I couldn't let her strain herself, and she would have. She was that determined. So I carried the vats out and loaded them on the truck. Five in all. She got behind the wheel. I asked her again where she's planning to take it. All she says is, 'Get in, Ferris. I'll need you when I get there.' She drove like a crazy woman. I didn't know where to until she pulls up at Eaton's. 'Now,' she says, 'we take these down on the dock.' She trained the truck lights down the dock, and I did what she said. I did what she said, but all the time what she said about me was burning up inside me. Wanting a way out. When I got through and started back to the truck she met me halfway. 'We aren't finished yet,' she says. 'Now I want you to empty the vats, empty the vats just where they are and spread them thin and then'—she held out something in her hand; it was matches—'then strike a match to it.' I'd been sweating from carrying the vats, and when she held out them matches the sweat turned cold on my back. My shirt felt like it was dipped in ice. My mouth must have dropped open, because she said, 'Stop looking like an idiot and get to work.' She tried to push the matches in my hand, but I pulled my hand back. I said, 'No. You're crazy, ma'am.' I said, 'Come on home before you get us both in trouble.' She pushed by me, almost knocked me in the water. She went aboard the boat and began yanking the tops off those vats and turning them over like they was paper. Then she tackled them that was on the dock. When she was done she threw a match and started running back to the truck. I ran after her. 'You drive,' she said. She was shaking like an aspen."

"Why are you coming to me with this? Did she send you?" Flagg interrupted. Leaping out of his chair, he went and towered over the hunched figure.

Mutely Ferris shook his head. "Lord forgive me, I wish it were so."

"Then why, why? Why me?"

"I'm not finished. That was just the start of it. We drove to Menlo, she shaking and nothing to say. I couldn't think of what to say either, nothing she'd want to hear at any rate . . ."

Restlessly Flagg returned to his chair, and Ferris, sensing his impatience, said, "I know it's long in the telling, Mr. Thorpe, but it's got to be told out so's you'll see how it all come about.

"By the time we got home we could look over toward Eaton's way and see the sky was red. I asked her why she done it. She didn't answer. She said. 'Come into the house, Ferris. There's something I want to say to you.' I followed her up and in. It was to the study she went. She sat down behind my grandfather's desk and his father's desk before him, and she wasn't shaking any more. I stayed next to the door. I knew from the look of her no good was going to come of this. 'Why wouldn't you help me there at the dock?' she said, cold as winter. I told her I had no heart for burning somebody else's property. 'I had my reasons,' she said. 'You should respect them. You should have helped me. You are fired!' she said, as though it was nothing she was saying. She opened a drawer and pulled out a checkbook. 'You will have a month's wages, and you will never put foot on Menlo again.' All the time she was talking she was scribbling on the check. I couldn't take it in right off. She held me out the check across the desk just like she'd held out them matches, and just like then, I wouldn't take it. She said, 'And you needn't think people will believe you when you tell them about tonight. They won't, you know. They'll think you've got unhinged and mad because of being fired. Because of losing Menlo. No one will listen. They'll just lock you in the booby hatch and forget you. Here.' She pushed the check at me again. I started backing out of the room. She came after me with it. 'Say something,' she said. 'Say anything—that I'm a cruel, heartless woman without a soul. Say anything you like, but take this check. Take it and get out so that I can call Menlo my own. Mine, mine, and no cracker heir hanging around to deny it.' She was waving the check under my nose and looking at me like I was dirt. And you know what I was thinking? All the time I was thinking she was the most beautiful woman God ever made and that He'd had no right to make her so. Then she reached out and stuffed the check in my shirt pocket and began to laugh. 'Poor Ferris, I really think you're in love with me,' she said, and her perfume and her laughing were like to drown me. I reached back and hit her with my fist. I hit her square on the jaw. I thought I was an old man. I didn't know I had such a fist. I didn't know . . ." Ferris broke off and buried his head in his arms. Flagg leaned forward.

"And then?" he said.

"I must have broken her neck," Ferris said in a voice so low it might have been a whisper. "That's what must have happened, because she was

dead and not a bruise on her.”

“Are you sure?” I said, and Flagg said:

“Did you get a doctor?”

“She was dead, I tell you.”

Flagg was on his feet and halfway out of the room. “Call Dr. Reed,” he said to me. “After that call the police. Ferris, you stay here until I get back.”

“Where are you going?” I said stupidly, because of course I knew. Clothes grimy, face still blackened from the fire she had kindled, he was going to her. I went to the window and watched him go, my heart calling out silent, empty words of comfort. For I knew Gloria was dead. There was a stillness, a quietness, a peace about everything I looked upon that told me so. Behind me in the room Mr. Ferris said:

“She looked like an angel lying there, a black-haired angel with broken wings. She was right, you know, about how I felt. I reckon you would call it love for want of something finer.”

## EPILOGUE

For all the honest fury of that farewell in the little drawing room at Menlo, Gloria had, in a sense, been correct. Not in a few hours does a man dispense with so compelling a passion. Nor with hate. Nor with regret. I was afraid the day might never come when Flagg could speak her name as casually, as easily, as any other, but it has. It has.

Flagg has prospered. His trawlers rake the waters from Hatteras to the Keys, and the shrimp packed and frozen at Eaton's Landing find their way to dinner tables all across the country.

Sarah now attends Miss Hughes's Friday afternoons, though Miss Hughes has long been dead and the class taught by the niece who used to play the piano for us. Betsy is her father's shadow and can sail a boat from Eaton's to Pritchard's without compass or crew. Tomorrow her small red-haired brother has asked to go along. I shall, of course, be anxious but cannot say nay. He swims as well as any of us and handles best, I've learned, with a slack rein.

Our life is uneventful if any life that contains three active, growing children can be called that. Flagg and I last year acquired a thirty-foot ketch, and occasionally, when stress of business or children indicates, we take to the sea. He named her *Miss Lucy*, and while she cannot compare with *Miss Pritchard* in discomfort or character, the sky we sail under is the same sky as on that day so many, many years ago when first we set sail together, Flagg and I.

I drove past the gates of Menlo today. The fig vine that traces the brick gateposts is kept tidily clipped. The Royal Bay Historical Society has seen to that. It has also seen to the polishing of the brass plaque embedded in one of the posts proclaiming Menlo a gift to them from the late Gloria McGill Bartow. After all these years this message of posthumous philanthropy gleams as brightly as on the day when it was first placed there. I am glad that memory does not wear nearly so well and that Gloria's imprint on our lives has faded and softened with the years. Glad that now I only think of her when it pleases me to do so and then am more apt to think of her as a little girl, with gypsy hair, flying around the kitchen on Palm Street, her head full of improbable dreams that should never have come true.

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Always in August* by Anne Christensen Morse]