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Chapter One

The Chinese symbol for trouble, her late husband was fond of saying, is two women under one roof top.

More and more Cordelia Newman was inclined to believe the adage. Just now Elspeth, her daughter and only child, was undergoing one of her periodic pacings. Nerves brought this on, of course. But the truth of it was Cordelia's own nerves were stretched to the point of almost breaking.

Cordelia had witnessed these pacings since Elspeth was a child. And because of it, or in spite of it, Cordelia at the age of sixty-two actually was considering psychiatry. For herself. She would never go through with it, however. She knew that. Psychiatry and that sort of thing diminished one in the town where she lived. Ashton. Ashton, Georgia. The town and her position in it were important to her. She could not weather the wagging tongues again. Nor touches of madness.

Ashton and Elspeth were her whole life now. Sad, she often thought. But the truth of it was there.

Elspeth, once a sweet and pretty young child, all at once it seemed, developed into the odd and eccentric human being she now appeared. But, and Cordelia told herself this often, there were good things, too. Cordelia soothed herself with the ~~lot~~ter. Certainly Elspeth was no beauty, but she had a lovely complexion, dark generous eyes and one could even say an altogether winning face. But her dark hair was thin and tightly permed, an imperfection Cordelia had pointed out more times than she wanted to recall. Once she even went to the hair dresser's with Elspeth, bringing pictures and drawings to the beautician. To no avail. Elspeth liked her hair. Also, the girl was tall, slightly ungainly and when she paced these errors were exaggerated. But she carried her heavy-breasted, thin-legged body with dignity. She walked at the same slant her father had walked.

They were alike, John Henry Newman and her daughter Elspeth. Both were intellectuals, John Henry had been the author of several children's books published by a regional publishing house in Atlanta and he also taught English at the teacher's college outside of Ashton. For years John Henry's family had been one of the leading families in the town. That, however, was history. Inflation and John Henry's death had left Cordelia in a state of busy concern. Not poverty-stricken concern. Just concern. She did own her house and there was the apartment building the Newmans had owned

forever. "Forever" was the key word here. The roof was always leaking and the new tenants had to have air conditioning. But the place brought in some income. Besides the apartment house there were also various stocks and bonds and some insurance, which inflation consumed year by year.

In the past few years Cordelia had taken to "forgetting" bills, placing them in various drawers about the house or in old hat boxes, then forgetting where she had placed them. When the billings grew threatening she paid the minimum and waited for the next month's delivery. She was not dumb. She often told herself that. She had been a high school teacher. She taught home economics. That was how she had come to Ashton from her home in Tennessee, to accept a teaching position. Thereby meeting John Henry. But that was in the past. Currently the bills must be paid. In the best way they could.

The town thought she was rich. If not truly rich, then comfortable. Her house was the Old Newman house, a Greek revival affair with chandeliers and portraits of various Newmans in almost every room. Her own family in Tennessee, penniless but genteel, also adorned the walls. Long ago she had an out-of-town artist paint some of her own family members from old photographs she had kept. And now they looked down on guests in all their fake largess. Cordelia had looked at them so long now she had almost forgotten they were mere copies. She spoke frequently of the artist. He died in the War Between the States, she told everyone.

She was not a liar. She often told God that. She merely enhanced life. And that was because money had replaced family in importance in Ashton. The Newman name was old, but the fact that John Henry had taught English at an unimportant college lessened the effect of the name and the house. Had he been a bank president or owner of one of the textile mills in the town the name then would have been revered. Alas, it was not so.

All these realities kept Cordelia in a less than harmonious state. She entertained constantly, using the Newman china and glassware. Naturally Elspeth declined to take part in any of the lunches or dinners. Instead she stayed in her room reading or making plans for the school library where she worked.

Cordelia had had such pleasant dreams for Elspeth. She named her for her mother's side. The name was Scottish meaning Elizabeth, and there had been many Elspeths down the line. When the girl was born, "torn" as Cordelia expressed it, from her flesh after eighteen hours of labor, Cordelia saw her own features in the infant. She herself had been a lovely looking younger woman. She was often told that. And she knew it herself. She had a picture of herself and regarded it often, admiring the softly waved dark hair and blue eyes. She had her mother's elegant chin and straight nose. She was slender then and had kept her figure until she was forty-eight. That was the year John Henry died. Currently, she was "full-figured" but with the same handsome facial features.

When Elspeth turned eleven she suddenly took on the Newman features. Fair enough, however the Newmans were a rigid consort without an iota of grace in any of them. Frankly, Cordelia had never liked her husband's family. They were a stubborn Presbyterian lot and looked down on Cordelia's frivolity of replacing brass chandeliers in the house with crystal ones. Since John Henry was the last surviving Newman he was to have the house. His parents moved out and lived two streets away in a former parsonage, eyeing every act Cordelia attended to.

Yes, Elspeth was a Newman.

Up the hall, down the hall. Pace. Pace. Cordelia watched with a burning eye as she sat in the drawing room. The reason for the pacing at this juncture was obvious. At thirty, Elspeth was having her first date with a man.

Elspeth had never got on with the young men in Ashton. At dancing school she was too tall and stepped on the boys' feet. She always danced with Mr. Harding, the dancing instructor. After three or four of these sessions she quit the dance class altogether. Cordelia tried everything, buying clothes she could scarcely afford. But Elspeth looked ridiculous in the feminine attire, her long arms hanging almost down to her knees and loping about with the lace and ruffle, silly anachronisms.

At the University of Georgia she was not chosen to join a sorority. But she made Phi Beta Kappa and Cordelia feigned joy. She loved her daughter. She truly did. But her

disappointment was extreme. Sometimes she wondered if other mothers felt similar emotions, and if so did they also feel guilt.

Elsbeth had not told Cordelia about the date. Poor Hattie told her. "Poor" Hattie was the sometime ^{black} housekeeper Cordelia had hired when she was first married. Hattie was seventy-two now and suffered with gall bladder, dropsy and various other asundry ailments. But they were friends, Cordelia and Hattie. That was how Cordelia knew there was not one ounce of prejudice in her entire soul. She loved Hattie. Almost more than Elspeth.

"Els-buth gone go out with a man!" Hattie announced as she was clearing the breakfast dishes. Hattie never smiled. She frowned constantly, bearing life and the world as it came.

Hattie and Elspeth were also close. They spoke at length about race relations in the South and elsewhere. Hattie always agreed with Elspeth. "Don't say?" Cordelia could hear Hattie's remark from the kitchen.

"Of course," Elspeth would say. "There's not a grain of difference between blacks and whites."

In her heart of hearts Cordelia considered Elspeth's remark stupid. Of course there were differences. There were differences in looks, temperament, culture. But none of that was of concern to her now. Elspeth's having a date with a man was all consuming. It was like an epiphany. Naturally Elspeth had said nothing to Cordelia. Elspeth never confided anything to her mother. They were not close in that way.

Elsbeth appeared to suffer alone. Perhaps "endured" was a better word. Cordelia was positive the girl was unhappy. She had to be. Thirty and not married. Still, Elspeth had the uncanny ability to shrug things off as if to say "that is the way things are. So what?" But she must have experienced profound pain along the way. At the dances, at recess when she was never chosen, when she walked home from school alone. Always alone.

John Henry, ^{her husband,} though an intellectual as well, had not been like that. He had many friends, at college and in the town. When he was buried the local newspaper wrote that Ashton had never known a man with such intelligence, such genuine kindness to everyone in "all walks of life." That was true: John Henry had been a sweet soul.

Elsbeth had some of this. She was always kind to animals and those born to inferior stations in life. But when it came to her peers she would sit with her arms crossed staring, saying nothing. It was her way of ridding herself of the interlopers. Or so Cordelia thought. She kept TELLING Elspeth that she should keep up her end of the conversation, that she should smile occasionally, that she was just plain rude. All to no avail. But now it appeared things were about to change.

Elsbeth had fixed herself up a bit for the "date". She had put on a little rouge and the white blouse and dark skirt were becoming. She looked almost pretty. Sometimes Cordelia thought that Elspeth should have moved away from Ashton, been

on her own. People here in Ashton knew too much about her, would never see the possibilities she had. But then she had been away to Athens, at the University of Georgia, and nothing had happened there. No boys, friends, nothing.

At dinner Cordelia tried to find out something about this man who had seen something in Elspeth. She just came right out with it:

"Who is he?"

"You wouldn't know him."

"But who is he?"

Elspeth glanced up at her once and continued eating.

"What is his name, then?"

"Bob. Robert Browne."

Cordelia knew no one of importance by that name in Ashton. "Where is he from?"

"New York."

"New York? My goodness, Elspeth."

She looked blankly at her mother.

"You can't just be going out with somebody from New York. All the terrible things happening---everywhere. You don't know anything about him, where he comes from. He could be----"

The girl left the table and Cordelia sat there holding her fork as if something was unfinished. Of course she wanted, prayed, for Elspeth to have a normal life. She wanted her to marry, have children, especially boys. She wanted grandchildren. Especially grandsons. Bright, energetic ones who could make money, carry on the name.

But this! A stranger. Elspeth was so naive. She might even be raped, get AIDS, die. The thought was a shot right to Cordelia's heart. She would be alone then, completely alone. An only child herself, Cordelia had no brothers or sisters. Only one ancient cousin, whose only contact was a Christmas card each year. There was never even a note, just the name. The thought of being alone in this enormous house was so compelling she rose from her chair and went out into the hall.

"You look very nice," Cordelia said as the girl slowed her pacing.

Cordelia sat in one of the hall chairs and half expected Elspeth to sit in the opposite. She did not. Instead she took hold of the newel post and eased herself onto the third step, smoothing her skirt with her long fingers.

"Tell me something about this man, Elspeth."

"He's a lieutenant out at the Fort." She was referring to the army camp near Ashton whose economy was crucial to the town's very existence.

Cordelia just came right out with it. "You have to watch out about AIDS nowadays. Everybody does. Even people who are normal."

Elspeth regarded her as if she were a child, a stupid one.

"I declare, the world has just turned over," Cordelia said, ignoring the girl's expression. "It's like we were at war."

Again Elspeth said nothing. That was what was so infuriating about the girl. Cordelia had to do all the talking, actually straining to think up things to say. She wondered what the two of them, this Browne man and Elspeth, had to say to each other.

"How did you meet him?"

"At a library meeting."

"You just started talking?"

"There was a book he wanted in the school library. The local library didn't have it."

Cordelia clasped her hands together. At least, the man read. Most, nowadays, just stared at the television. "How wonderful you had the book," she said, straining enthusiasm. Elspeth was never enthusiastic about anything, not even at Christmas.

Suddenly Elspeth regarded her with half closed lids. "Are you going to be sitting there?"

Cordelia's voice tightened and she firmed her lips to hold back the tears. "Am I in the way?" she asked in a halting voice.

"Not exactly."

The heat rose to her face and she stood. Anger had replaced tears. "I'll just go in the drawing room. But if you ask me I think a daughter should introduce her visitors to her mother. He needs to know where you come from."

"The century's almost ending," Elspeth said in her slow deep drawl.

And then the door bell rang, chimes. Cordelia had put the chimes in when she first moved into the house. La, da, da, they went down the scale melodiously. Cordelia sat in the small rocker near the mantel and took up her knitting. In no way did she wish to appear she was witnessing an EVENT.

"Hello, Bobby. You found the house all right?"

"No trouble." The voice was deep and the letters R and L were emphasized. It was a northern voice, unfamiliar to Cordelia's ears, though it had an intelligent sound. Cordelia had never been to New York. She saw no reason to go there, but she viewed it on television, thousands of people streaming down the streets and she read of the rapes and murders and horror. She didn't see why anybody would want to live there.

"Come in," said Elspeth.

Cordelia began to ~~knit~~^{try it} furiously, dropping stitches and purling when she wasn't supposed to.

"Beau-ti-ful," the man said. "I've seen pictures of these southern houses."

Then they were standing in the drawing room. He, in his uniform and stocky, shorter than Elspeth. His eyes were dark and there were shadows on his cheeks and jowls.

Why, you're Jewish, Cordelia almost said aloud. Instead, she put her knitting aside and smiled at the couple.

"Mother, this is Robert. Bob Browne."

It wasn't a Jewish name. How strange.

He came toward her, his hand outstretched. He had a nice face, strong. If only he had shaved more closely. Perhaps

he didn't have time. the army kept one so busy.

"Do sit down, Mr. Browne," Cordelia said.

"We don't have time," said Elspeth. "The play is starting now."

The man looked back at Elspeth and then at Cordelia again.

"Next time," he said and smiled. He had a nice smile, nice teeth.

So there would be a next time, Cordelia thought. They must be serious.

"You have a beautiful house, Mrs. Newman." He was regarding the painting over the mantle, one Cordelia had never cared for. It was too dark and nothing but mountain ranges. John Henry had liked it and his parents before him. She had never dared move it.

"Is this a Bierstadt?"

"Yes," she lied. She had never known who painted it---or cared.

For a brief second his expression recalled John Henry's *(her husband's)* regard when he observed the painting. She decided she liked the man. He was sensitive, just like John Henry. He was definitely not a rapist. Did sensitive men rape?

"You'd better wear a little sweater or something, Elspeth," she said. "It's going down to fifty tonight."

The summer was over. Autumn, dreaded autumn, had arrived. John Henry died in October. He died when there was a roaring fire in the fireplace, a mere cozy afternoon with

the city ablaze with color, each tree a burning bush.

"I'm all right," Elspeth said.

Rouge was becoming to Elspeth, Cordelia was thinking. In the softened light Elspeth looked downright beautiful, if only she would stand straighter and soften her hair.

"We'll see you again," said Lt. Browne and Cordelia heard the ls again. The man seemed to bring energy to the room. He wasn't like most of the men she entertained in this room. Husbands of her friends. John Henry's friends. They were either too fat or too thin and they had slow ways and voices as comfortable as the room itself.

Cordelia walked with them to the front entrance.

"I hope the play is good," she said. "Remember it's just local." She was speaking of the Little Theatre whose performers were all residents of the county. But what she was thinking was that everyone would see Elspeth with a date. She wondered what their reaction would be. She glowed inwardly.

She carefully closed the front door and locked it, hoping Elspeth had not forgot a key. The girl was not used to going out at night and she was so absent minded. Just like John Henry. Neither was made for the practical world. She often wondered what would become of them if it hadn't been for her.

She went back to the drawing room for some serious thinking. If Elspeth married this Lt. Browne her children would be half Jewish. Jews were no rarity to Cordelia. Ashton had some Jewish families, all lovely people. Old families, from way back. Cordelia herself never thought about

their being any different from anybody else. No one else in the town did either. She did remember one blunder May Beth Hughes made one time. They had been talking about one of the better neighborhoods in Ashton and May Beth said it looked like all the Jews were moving there, and then she remembered that Dorothy Roth, who was listening and Jewish, was present.

May Beth quickly added: "And I'm so gla-yad."

Cordelia smiled over the thought. May Beth Hughes was a bit of a fool. In Charleston there were fine old Jewish families and in New Orleans, too. Southerners, the right kind, just didn't have prejudices at all about their own kind, Jewish or not. But she didn't know about New York. She had seen New York Jews in the movies but they weren't like this Lt. Browne.

Then the thought struck her that if they married they would have to live in New York. Impossible. She dismissed the thought instantly. They would live in Ashton, and after the babies were born Cordelia and Elspeth would visit back and forth. Maybe they would like to live in the house with her. Lt. Browne could pay a little rent for the upkeep of things.

The arrangement was so pleasant she believed she would call up May Beth Hughes and just casually mention that Elspeth had a date. She might just brag a bit about Elspeth looking almost beautiful. She wanted the word out that Elspeth was dating and the way to get the word out was to let May Beth Hughes know about it. May Beth Hughes was a walking Reader's Digest.

"Hey-lo." May Beth had a drawl unrivaled anywhere in Georgia.

"I'm so glad to catch you," said Cordelia. "I declare, these autumn days in this big house are so lonesome."

"Where's Elspeth?" May Beth shot right back.

"She's at the theater," said Cordelia. "The most charming young man---"

"Rally?" All of May Beth's hidden thoughts were preeminently public. "~~May Beth's~~^{Elspeth's} met somebody?"

"A young lieutenant from out at the Fort. He's interested in reading and you know Elspeth. Anybody who reads is a friend for life."

"Well, I declare."

"Yes, he's interested in art and old houses, too..."

"Oh." There was satisfaction in the word.

"He's not funny or anything. He's a lieutenant in the army, very masculine. Just a renaissance type. You know?"

May Beth did not know, but she said she did. When Cordelia announced that he was from New York May Beth asked if Cordelia knew anything about his background, his family, where he went to college. But Cordelia said she really hadn't had time to go into all that. But she added that one could tell. One could tell instantly how someone had been reared. And May Beth agreed.

End of conversation. But Cordelia returned to the drawing room satisfied that all the world would know Elspeth was soon to be wed and that there would be grandchildren and

Cordelia's old age would be delightfully safe.

No one would like that, of course. No one liked it if anything good happened. They liked you only when the bad things came on. If she were to live in this house alone, terrified of every sound, afraid even to go outside and there would never be anyone to talk to---then---she would be liked, perhaps even admired.

She was feeling tired. But she would wait up. Wait for Elspeth to return. She wouldn't be able to sleep anyway. She was positive Elspeth didn't have a key. ~~She~~ how lovely the world was! In the distance was the sound of wedding bells.