

Chapter Three

Cordelia immediately saw what was happening. The Whitfield girl, Legare or Gree, as she was called, was a beautiful young woman. She had dark auburn hair and large brown eyes that regarded the world with a mixture of both melancholy and joy. Odd in so young a woman. She was tall and slender like her father and there was something almost heart-breaking in the vulnerability of her manner.

The girl had never graduated from college. She had left her freshman year and one seldom heard of her activities. She lived with her parents, the last of the Whitfield children, and she did not work or take part in the various charity organizations in the town.

A bit of a mystery, all of it. But Horace Boccock had fallen hard for the girl, or so it was told, and though he was much older it was believed marriage was in the future.

But tonight she looked especially alluring. She was wearing a rose wool dress, which highlighted her hair. The girl was distinguished looking, as well, taking after her father in this. Cordelia had always considered her father, Allison Whitfield, to be an aristocratic looking man, tall and slender with a manly bearing. Cordelia had heard he had been ill this last year and perhaps that was the reason Legare preferred to stay at home.

Lt. Browne was enchanted. He fairly beamed as he sat on the delicate antique sofa, regarding Legare across the room seated in the Queen Ann chair (covered also in rose velvet).

"Say that name again," he said to Gree.

"What name?" the girl had a low voice.

"Charlotte."

"Chawlot," she said. She had a pleasant southern accent. In the southern accents were everything. As soon as anyone opened their mouth you knew exactly who they were and what they had come from.

Lt. Browne beamed further. "I love that," he said. "I love that accent."

"Elsbeth's hardly got an accent at all," said Cordelia. "I don't know how she got that way."

"Oh, she's got one all right," said Lt. Browne. "But not as much as some."

Elsbeth was seated near the sofa. Her arms were crossed and Cordelia tried to uncross them by making little faces and gestures with her own arms.

At the mention of her name she smiled slightly. "The world is changing. Television has been a leveling force. We'll all sound alike in time."

"That would be a pity," said Lt. Browne, taking up his dark drink from the coffee table in front of him. He swirled the ice and liquid, then sipped from the glass.

"Where were you in school, Robert?" Horace Boccock asked. "Before the army, that is."

"Dartmouth."

Cordelia noted the slightest show of pride as he named his alma mater. Slyly he was attempting to say Dartmouth was every bit as prestigious as Brown, where Horace was graduated, and probably more so. The man looked better tonight than before, Cordelia noted. He had shaved closer and he appeared thinner and taller for some reason.

"Dartmouth," said Horace and seemed to move uncomfortably in his chair. Horace had misjudged this dark lieutenant. Cordelia was aware of Horace's additional attentiveness. He was wetting his lips. For the first time Cordelia saw the resemblance of Horace Boccock to Marlon Brando, a thinner one. He was blond and had an almost beautiful mouth. The upper lip curved almost like a sexy girl's. But his mannerisms were different from Brando's. For a moment Cordelia wondered if Horace Boccock was peculiar, funny. But he appeared to like girls. The world had got so strange these days. Nobody knew what anybody was any more.

"Two Ivy Leaguers all in one room," she said aloud and

laughed a high girlish laugh. She instantly ceased when she became aware of the response in the room. All eyes were viewing her in stony silence. Young people, she thought. So serious. It was better to age a bit. Things aren't so serious then.

"Another drink anybody?" She rose from the chair.

"Yes," said Elspeth. "I think we all need another." And with that the room did laugh. They thought Elspeth was amusing and Lt. Browne regarded her with his dark French eyes approving.

Cordelia went to fetch Amos, who did not like to serve drinks on a tray. He wanted to stand behind a bar and perform half veiled from the room. Amos did not have steady hands with a tray. But Cordelia resolutely refused to have a bar in her house. That was common, she had long ago reasoned. When she returned to the hall she heard a different sound in the drawing room. Laughter and gaiety which had been noticeably lacking before. It was as if something had been freed. For a moment she hesitated. Perhaps she should leave the young along^e. But no. She was hostess here. And she had always congratulated herself on the fact she got along with all sorts and conditions of men. Young and old. They all spoke to her at the Episcopal church.

"Republican," Horace Boccock was saying. "For years my family was just about the only republican in town or anywhere near here. But now it's odd to be a democrat."

"That's true," said Cordelia, entering the room. She did

not say she voted for democrats most of the time. To everyone else she had become a republican. It was the social thing to be.

"Well, I'm a democrat," said Lt. Browne.

"And---so am I," said Elspeth.

~~Odd.~~ They both were trying to be odd and liberal.

"Well, you're from New York," said Horace. "That's the difference. You read the New York Times too much. The whole city does."

"Just like the Atlanta Constitution," said Cordelia.

"They make me so maaaad. You'd think George Bush was a common criminal."

"They're just pitching toward circulation," said Horace.

"Yes," mused Cordelia. She whispered. "All black."

And in walked Amos, the tray shaking, his face a dark scowl.

Elspeth took a glass from the shaking tray and Cordelia noted the glass was as dark as Lt. Browne's. Both were drinking bourbon, but Elspeth had begun acting oddly. She was making little faces and opening her mouth and lifting her shoulders as if in silent laughter. Cordelia stared at her. Elspeth was drunk.

The realization caused her entire being to jolt. "Come with me a few minutes, Elspeth dear," she said.

"What for?" asked Elspeth and the words were slurred, not so much that others in the room could tell. But Cordelia knew.

"I need a little help with something," Cordelia said, standing.

Elspeth also stood and bowed lowly to the room, a grand gesture, sweeping, that caused smiles and a little laughter. Had they known Elspeth, known her well, they certainly would not have laughed. Grand gestures were never associated with Elspeth. Ever. But now perhaps the guests thought this was her charm, her wit. Cordelia partially soothed herself with the idea.

Elspeth was much taller than Cordelia so that Cordelia for most of her life had looked up at her daughter. The facts of height translated into other things as well. Intimidation, for one. Sometimes, rather most of the time, Cordelia felt diminished by Elspeth.

She frowned now as she looked up at her swaying daughter. Elspeth was still sipping her drink and looking everywhere except at Cordelia.

"You're drunk," said Cordelia. And she took hold of the girl's arm, pressing. "Now put that glass down. And don't have anymore. I'm ashamed of you. What do you think that lieutenant is thinking?"

"I'm all right," managed Elspeth and began blinking and narrowing her eyes.

"No, now, you're not. Now put down the glass." Cordelia attempted to remove the glass from her hands, but Elspeth whirled around and with humped shoulders attempted to caress the glass.

"Elspeth, this is embarrassing."

"It wasn't my idea," Elspeth was mumbling.

Was she purposely doing this? Just to humiliate her?

"You have to do your part," Cordelia said. "Do you think you can manage to go back in the room?"

"Of course." And Elspeth, head high, marched back into the room. It fleetingly went through Cordelia's mind that Elspeth had a nice carriage for someone so tall. Her own height certainly didn't intimidate her.

At dinner Elspeth was oddly quiet and the Whitfield girl, dainty and lovely, was the object of everyone's attention. She was telling about her year at the University of Oslo in Norway. Lt. Browne had been to Scandinavia, and the two took over the conversation.

Which was a singular bore to Cordelia. She wanted to talk about herself, tell these people something about her background, where she came from, that she was somebody. Of course, her lovely house said something, but not everything. Young Bocock was too young to know about her genteel background and her important connections in Tennessee. Nashville. Subtly she wanted these people to know Elspeth was aristocratic. But both she and Elspeth remained silent through the quails, the avocada and grapefruit salad and finally the Alaska pie, which arrived looking like a field of lush cotton.

After dinner, in the drawing room over brandy, Cordelia again was aware of Lt. Browne's seeming fascination with

Legare Whitfield. He sat alone on the antique sofa, glass in hand, and appeared to be studying the young woman, his dark eyes sombre and his mouth fixed in a slight smile.

The conversation had been reduced to the weather. It was already snowing in New York, but here in Georgia the skies were a clear blue and the world was a rainbow of color.

"Our autumns are long," Cordelia was saying. "In New England they are so short."

"And then come the snows," said Horace Bocock. "God, I nearly froze to death when I was in college."

Cordelia did not think Horace Bocock would say "god" that way. She had never heard either his mother or father utter the slightest profanity.

"Don't they have a winter carnival at Dartmouth?" the Whitfield girl asked. "All that snow and stuff."

Lt. Browne said that indeed there was such a carnival but he fairly well disregarded it. And then Cordelia's mind reversed itself. From the lull of the weather-talk Lt. Browne tossed out a rather pointed statement. He had worked his way through college, done manual work in the summer. "I stayed out an entire year to work and save for tuition."

So he was not rich. His background was poor. He probably had ten brothers and sisters. Cordelia pictured their life: a street full of row houses, children in the streets and inside the Browne house were dark rooms huddled together with the smell of cooking cabbage permeating each corner.

"My roommate did that," said Horace Bocock. "It was tough."

"If you don't have any other choices," said Lt. Browne and the statement was like a question. "I worked in the library, the dining halls, cleaned basements. Name it. I did it."

In the depths of her mind Cordelia had some admiration for this. For there was a certain similarity in their lives, though Cordelia had never cleaned out a basement. But her own college days were lean and busy, tutoring and then tutoring again when she returned home for holidays. There was never extra money from anywhere. She knew this to be so, though she had successfully blocked the memories through the years. She had manufactured an entirely different Cordelia Newman, one in which her young days were easy and careless, rich.

Now, though, her disappointment was extreme. She had rather hoped money would be coming to Elspeth and her through this dark stranger. He must not have had much of a job as an editor, either. Why would he have volunteered for the army? Wanting to know the world, as Elspeth explained, seemed more like a fantasy or downright lie.

Cordelia narrowed her eyes as she regarded the man. Did he think Elspeth was rich? Was that why he was here, paying attention to her? There were such men, Cordelia knew. They came out of the shadows, all charm and brains, and calculated their way through life.

Lt. Browne was calculating Elspeth. This house, the

antiques, paintings would all be his. And he and Elspeth would live here and write their strange stories and books and never have any children because Elspeth would be too old.

"Well, children," Cordelia said aloud and rose from her chair. "It's my bedtime. But you just stay and enjoy yourselves."

The entire room rose in unison. She shook hands with the Whitfield girl first and then the two men. She scarcely glanced at Elspeth. As she ascended the stairs she heard the voices in the drawing room. The tone of the evening had instantly lightened. She had to admit to herself the foreign sense of alienation. It was odd. She never thought of herself as old. Her looks now had been so slow in coming that she saw herself as still young, thin. But when she compared herself to someone like the Whitfield girl the truth appeared. Also in photographs. But she merely dismissed the latter as poor photography.

The chatter below told everything. The young were pleased to be rid of her. Perhaps she should have stayed the entire evening in her room like Elspeth did when she entertained her friends. But this was her house and she would reign at table as long as she had breath. Never would she hide from anybody. Still, the hurt was there.

In time she heard the first car make its way down the gravel driveway. She was sure it was Horace Boccock and the Whitfield girl. The Lieutenant remained. She concluded that, on paper, Lieutenant Browne would appear a bit of a

catch should an engagement be announced. Elspeth, then, would rise in the eyes of the town. And so would she.

It was a pleasant thought and the waves of alcohol inside her soon lulled her to sleep.

Miraculously, and with no movement by Cordelia whatsoever, Lt. Browne became a presence in the house. Cordelia became aware of this the very next week. He appeared on Wednesday night, then Saturday and Sunday. And as the weeks wore on he became a routine. The two never stayed at the house, though Cordelia suggested this on more than one occasion, but they quickly left, sometimes for dinners, sometimes at the Fort, leaving Cordelia alone to dine and stare into solitary space. She did not know where they went or what they did. Elspeth was as silent as the air when the questions arose.

And then one night the situation exploded. Elspeth announced she was leaving the house, that she had found an apartment. She announced this casually as if she had said she ^{were} ~~was~~ merely going for a walk and would be back soon.

"You're what!?" Cordelia finally blurted out when her mind had taken in the full meaning of the words. She and Elspeth were taking the dishes into the kitchen after dinner when Elspeth, dirty plate in hand, said:

"Oh, by the way."

Cordelia had two plates in her hand and was proceeding to the sink to rinse them. She turned full ~~l~~round when

Elspeth made her casual statement.

"Yes, Robert and I have talked, and I really need a place of my own."

"Robert? What has he got to do with it?"

"We talk," was all she said.

Cordelia slowly rinsed the two plates. She would be alone here.

"When are you leaving?" She heard the smallness in her voice.

"This weekend."

Cordelia turned back and faced Elspeth. She leaned on the sink for support. There was no change in the girl's face. It was as placid as a ~~vegetable~~ cabbage.

"Where are you going? Where is this apartment?"

"On Tenth and Cypress. No big deal."

Indeed, thought Cordelia. The street was once a lovely tree-lined avenue with large old Victorian houses that some of the finest families in Ashton had built at the turn of the century. Now it was marred by filling stations, hamburger palaces, social security offices and even a department store. There were still some remaining houses, but no one knew who lived in them. Transients mostly found lodging there.

"What will you do for furniture?" Cordelia was thinking that not one piece of furniture from this house would travel to a place like that.

"It's furnished, and Robert and I can pick up a few things."

Cordelia literally held onto the sink. "Robert?"

"Uh huh." Still casual.

She turned to face Elspeth again. "Will he be there, too?"

"Uh huh."

Cordelia saw flashes of lights before her.

"Elspeth Newman! You weren't brought up that way!"

Elspeth asked what way.

"To be a whore!"

Laughter. Elspeth was actually laughing.

"Stop it!" cried Cordelia. She had her hand on the sink.

^{Elspeth} She drew a chair up to the kitchen table. "We need to talk. Sit down." She indicated with the palm of her hand the chair opposite.

"I prefer to stand. Thank you."

But Elspeth sat down, then put her elbow on the table and rested her chin in her hand. Her hair, softer now, fell over her hand. She said nothing.

"Is that man going to live in the apartment with you?"

Elspeth nodded. Then lifted her face, a surprisingly pretty face. Elspeth had become prettier, much prettier, during the time with Lt. Browne. Or Robert, as she called him.

"We're very much in love," she said. It was the first show of emotion, other than irritation, Cordelia had ever heard or seen her exhibit. And for some horrible reason it was embarrassing----. Elspeth, the spinster, talking of being

"in love," hinting (or just as well) all sorts of sexual carryings on.

"You don't know the man, Elspeth. There're all sorts of diseases nowadays. You don't know him at all."

"I know him better than anyone on this earth." She was smiling, her dark eyes glistening as if she were seeing some acrylic paradise somewhere. "Times have changed since your day."

Cordelia sat in the chair sideways, not regarding Elspeth and her spiritual élan. She sat humped, defeated. All the dreams she had had for this girl, her daughter. No one in the family, on both sides, had ever been wanton. What would the town say?

"What will the town say?" she muttered aloud as if the thought were sudden.

"Who cares?"

"They care," said Cordelia. "A scandal."

The silence in the room was filled by the dripping faucet at the sink.

"Look at me," Elspeth said finally.

Cordelia slowly faced the girl. She sat with her hands folded and her mouth relaxed now as if she were willing to hear what she must. But in no way would she show by the slightest demean that she endorsed what Elspeth was setting out to do.

"Living together is a commitment. I want you to understand that. Robert and I love each other and we have

committed ourselves to each other. Now can't you see that?"

Cordelia lifted her head. "Marriage is the only commitment I know and it is also a sacrament in the Episcopal church. You were brought up to know that."

Elspeth traced her finger over an old crack on the wooden table. "I had hoped you would understand."

"Well, I don't." Cordelia wished the girl would look at her, see her defiance, hurt, disappointment. "Don't do this, Elspeth." She softened her voice. "You've been lonely so long." That was the way she wished to express it. She did not want to tell her daughter that she was sex-starved. Mothers did not say such things to daughters.

"It's not just sex, Mother." Elspeth regarded her then and there was the slightest show of anger in her eyes. "We think alike. Our minds are almost similar. We react alike. We are alike."

"You're no more like that man than I am. How do you think you know him so well when you haven't even met his family, seen what he comes from?"

Elspeth was staring at the dripping faucet. "I'm not going to live with his family."

"I've always taught you to be discreet, Elspeth. In all things."

Elspeth stood then and gently placed the chair back to the table again. It was a thinking gesture. "I have to live my own life," she said quietly and left the kitchen.

Cordelia stared at the pushed-up chair as if it were a

person. As if it were Elspeth herself sitting there, staring at her, not moving, saying impossible things, things that should have caused the roof of the house to fall, but it did not, and she, Cordelia, just sat there in the quiet kitchen, listening to the faucet and seeing doom ahead.