

Chapter Six

Jim Amory pulled up a chair nearer Cordelia's hospital bed, not actually smiling this time, but his unlined face (even at his age) was pleasant as his kindly blue eyes met Cordelia's.

"Now, Cordelia, I'm going to tell you the truth. There's no point in skidding around this thing."

"Cancer," said Cordelia.

"No, you don't have cancer. As a matter of fact you're in pretty good health for someone your age."

"We're exactly the same age, Jim Amory." She thought she might tease him some. She was so relieved about her health. "But what caused the dizziness?"

"As I said. I'm gone be frank." He took her hand and patted it. "Cordelia, all you had in this wuld was a hangover."

Cordelia jerked her hand away. "What are you talking about?" She half shouted.

The pleasantness in Jim Amory's face vanished. He hung his head and began slowly shaking it, eyes closed. Then he looked up at her and frowned. "You got a liver problem, Cordelia. Fatty liver. Beginning of something serious."

"Well, it wasn't caused by alcohol. You know that. You've known me all my life. Have you ever seen me have too much to drink?"

"Never." His mouth was hard.

"Then how can you sit there and tell me my troubles are a hangover?" She turned her head from him.

"You had a heepa alcohol in your blood."

Cordelia fisted her hands. She had a good mind to tell Jim Amory everything. Yes, she had been drinking too much. She knew that. But it was all because John Henry had gone and died and Elspeth was peculiar and living with a strange man who probably had AIDS. She would also add that the world was not kind and there was not one good thing about old age. She had discovered that. Not one good thing. You lost your looks, couldn't remember things, had odd aches and pains and the young made you feel timid.

But she said none of these things and Jim Amory rose from his chair. "You think seriously about all this, Cordelia. I want you to stay away from alcohol for at least two months. Not a drop of anything. Wine or anything. And then we'll check again to see."

"Are you standing there telling me you think I'm an alcoholic?"

"No. But I think you need to watch it."

She had never seem Jim Amory like this. He was serious. He was never serious. At parties he was always the center of things, laughing and carrying on. Which reminded her of what her mother was always saying: Don't ever marry a funny man. They are always too busy trying to be the life of things and never make any money.

But Jim Amory had plenty of money. All doctors in Georgia had money.

"I have to see a patient." Then he smiled. "Do as I say, Cordelia. And I think you'll be on your feet in no time." He vanished.

Leaving Cordelia lying on the bed like a huge fool. Jim Amory had stripped her of every inch of dignity she had ever had. She wondered if he were a gossip. What he told her in so many words was that she was nothing but an old drunk being dried out in a hospital bed.

Perhaps it was true. Perhaps her own vision of herself was a lie, forced. To the world she was an ageing aristocrat, well dressed, with refined jewelry and antiques and whose house was one of the show places in Ashton, if not all of Georgia.

But in the dark night she knew she drank too much and she did it merely to feel better, to bring back the vision she displayed to the world. She was not an old lonely woman

whose daughter cared nothing for her and who had not one living soul in this world. "The last leaf on the tree."

She said the words aloud and began to quietly sob. She held a pink kleenex to her nose and tried to hold back the tears. A nurse entered the room and interrupted her reverie.

"Have your bowels moved today?" she asked, looking at a chart in her hand.

The nurse was young, impatient.

"Yes," she lied. She wanted no more enemas. She had had enough of them in X-ray. She wadded the pink kleenex in her hand.

Without saying anything the nurse stuck a thermometer in her mouth and took hold of her wrist, all the time glancing at her watch.

Cordelia wondered if hangovers gave you a fever. And then the thought struck her that Jim Amory might have written on her chart that she had over-indulged in alcohol. The whole hospital, the nurses, doctors, everyone would spread the gospel: Cordelia Newman is a drunk. Elspeth would hear the news at school and be overcome with shame.

"Normal," said the nurse and dropped Cordelia's hand.

"There's a shortage, isn't there?" Cordelia asked.

"Pardon me?"

"Shortage of nurses?"

"Lady, you better believe it," said the nurse seemingly glad to express her plight. She didn't care about this ill patient. She only cared about herself. But then that is the way the world is going. Greed and Avarice. Everywhere.

Elsbeth arrived in the room like a sudden storm, fairly galloping and frowning, questioning. She took Cordelia by such surprise she had no time to sink into her feigned illness.

"Mother, what happened?" Elsbeth's mouth was one round O.

"Oh, nothing. They're taking a series of tests."

"What sort of tests?" The O and the staring returned.

"To find out what's wrong with me."

"What happened?" Elsbeth was standing by the bed. She looked enormous in the small room, tall--taller than Jim Amory even. But Cordelia did take in the fact that Elsbeth was looking prettier these days. There was a glow absent from her since she was a baby.

Cordelia told her she had got dizzy and the patrolman had brought her to the hospital.

"Everyone's rude," she ended.

"The admitting nurse said you could leave this afternoon."

Cordelia smiled then, for the first time since she had entered this pagan place. She wanted no more of nurses and nurses' aids. And, especially, she never wanted to see Dr. James Amory again. "My car's still on the thoroughfare. I just left it."

"I'll take you home, find out about the car. Robert will do that."

"No," said Cordelia. "I don't want to be beholdened to---"

"Let's not go into that again," said Elspeth. "Let me pack your things."

Cordelia indicated the closet.

"My god, you look like you came to stay."

"Hattie brought those. She seemed glad I was in the hospital."

"No, she was as worried as I am."

Cordelia sank into the pillow. Little breezes of pleasure played about her. It pleased her Elspeth was concerned. And there was no doubt about that. Elspeth never showed emotion of any sort, except boredom and sometimes anger. She watched as Elspeth folded the gowns and robes and carefully placed them in John Henry's old black grip.

As they drove home Cordelia studied Elspeth's profile. The girl did look pretty. She had gained some weight and it was becoming. If you didn't know some things you might say Elspeth was almost beautiful. the color in her cheeks heightened her dark eyes and hair.

"You're looking well," said Cordelia.

Elspeth glanced at her. "Thank you."

"Does your Robert come home every night?"

"As much as he can." She began to frown and her eyes were fixed on the road ahead.

"You don't talk about him much. When I was young and in love, which was all the time, I couldn't talk about another thing except the current beau."

"Well, we're different, I guess."

Cordelia started to say that was the truth, but the house was looming ahead and Elspeth turned into the driveway. It always gave her a lift, the sight of her handsome house. And now, in contrast to the grim hospital, the place looked fairly palatial.

Hattie was standing by one of the pillars ^{طرق} ~~ons~~ on the porch waving her apron.

"What's the matter with her?" Cordelia asked.

"She's black," said Elspeth.

Cordelia regarded Elspeth. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Everything," said Elspeth and parked the car. She got out immediately and came to open Cordelia's door.

Hattie came to the car. "Telephone. Miz Hughes on the phone. I told her you was ailing."

She helped Cordelia into the house.

"Yes?" Cordelia deliberately lowered her voice ^{on the telephone} emphasizing a heretofore unheard ~~of~~ catch.

"What in the world, Cordelia?" May Beth Hughes' voice was as excited as ever to hear disastrous news.

"I've been in the hospital."

"Why didn't somebody tell me?"

Cordelia watched as Hattie and Elspeth dragged her luggage and pocketbook up the stairs. They were treating her like a terminally ill patient.

"I just had a series of tests. Been having little dizzy spells lately. Nothing to worry about. Jim says not to worry."

"I would have sent you some flowers. Why didn't Elspeth or Hattie tell me?"

"Nobody knew." Cordelia could hear the pathos in her voice.

"Well, I just called to tell you how happy I am to hear the news."

"What news?"

"About Elspeth and that man about to get married!"

For the first time in her life Cordelia was without words. But she knew the silence was too revealing. Anger flashed like lightning across her eyes. Why hadn't Elspeth told her this--if it were true?"

"There's talk," was all she said. "Between the two of them, I guess."

"Oh really?" There was decided disappointment in the voice. "I heard everything was definite, that they've found an apartment and the wedding's gone be next month sometime. Near Christmas."

They're all talking, Cordelia was thinking. The whole town. Probably laughing, too, like those at the country club the other night.

"Thank you for calling, May Beth." All her married life, her years in Ashton, May Beth Hughes had used the same device to find out gossip. She would come forth with some shocking bit of news only to discover the real truth and in this case: that Elspeth was living with a man without benefit of marriage--Elspeth, the town's old maid, the ^{local} ~~same~~ joke.

"You take care of yourself, Cordelia," said May Beth.
"Do what the doctor tells you to do."

"Yes, I will."

The conversation was terminated and Cordelia suddenly felt exhausted. She believed she could not even climb the stairs. But holding on to the banister she managed, step by step, slowly to ascend.

Hattie and Elspeth were turning down her bed as she entered the bedroom.

"You isn't looking as peart as you did in the hospital," said Hattie.

Cordelia fairly flopped into the rocker by the window. "I'm exhausted." She placed her hand to her bosom and felt her heart beating hard against her chest. She was thinking that when the two of them, Elspeth and Hattie, left she would have a "little something" to give her energy. She wouldn't have much. Just a little. She was no alcoholic. Jim Amory didn't know what he was talking about. Probably if anybody was an alcoholic it was Jim Amory. She had seen him at parties, slapping men on the back and laughing too much.

"Now, Mother, you just get into bed and rest," said Elspeth, glancing at her watch.

"Aren't you going to spend the night?" Cordelia asked.

"No, I can't. But here, here is the number of the apartment across the way from us. Call if you need anything."

"You can call me, too," said Hattie. "I'll just get in

my piece-of-junk car and be here ~~for~~ before you know it."

They were leaving her--a dying woman just out of the hospital and they were leaving her here to leave this world alone. They just ~~didn't~~^{don't} care.

"You don't care," said Cordelia, looking straight at Elspeth.

"You'll be all right. I talked to Dr. Amory and he said there was nothing to worry about."

"What did he say?" Suddenly her energy returned. Fear gripped her.

"He said you were just a little run-down. That's all."

"Is that all he said?"

"Yes."

Cordelia could see by Elspeth's face she was telling the truth. Relief lulled her. "May Beth Hughes said you were getting married in December, near Christmas time."

"Whaaat?!" Elspeth was trying to laugh.

"She said you had found an apartment and you and that man were going to marry."

"Praise God," said Hattie. "Ma'hd!"

"I'm never going to marry," said Elspeth. "You can call up that old biddy and tell her that. Never."

Biddy. The word struck home. In secret did Elspeth think she, too, was that? May Beth Hughes was exactly her age.

"You shouldn't call my friends that."

"What?"

"Biddy. Or whatever you said."

"Well, that's what she is. She's nothing but a Chinese tank."

Cordelia stared at her. For a moment she wondered if Elspeth was having a nervous breakdown.

"Killing free will," said Elspeth, patting the pillow on the bed with more force than necessary. "I'm splitting. See you later."

And like a black bat she swooned out of the room. That was the way Elspeth had always been: here for a moment, gone the next. Cordelia had settled herself into the chair to have a nice conversation and now she felt suspended again.

"Yes, ma'm," said Hattie. "Now you call me if you need me. Don't pay no mind to Elsb^weth."

Cordelia looked out the window. All the trees were bare. There was one telephone pole with wires stretched to another pole. The scene was as grim as the hospital room.

"Elspeth's peculiar," she said to Hattie.

"You wouldn't want her to go through life without no man. That aint right neither."

"No, but I'm old fashioned."

"We're getting on. Young people nowadays don't think nothing of anything."

"Some do. The right sort."

"You be studying yourself about things you can't do nothing about. And you'll land back in the horspital."

Hattie added that she had fixed a little supper and it was in

the refrigerator.

Her saying that meant she, too, had decided to leave. Actually, Cordelia didn't mind. She had her thoughts on the bourbon bottle downstairs.

"Now you just get in the bed!" Hattie was turning the sheets back.

Cordelia told Hattie to "go on now." She said she would be fine. And Hattie went almost as fast as Elspeth. Neither cared anything for her. Genuinely so.

She thought about this as she sat in the library, glass in hand. The bourbon was a warming element after the coldness of the hospital. She needed warmth. She would have to tell Jim Amory that when she saw him again, if she saw him. Suddenly it occurred to her how enormous the house was. The hallway was like two hallways, long and wide. And the dining room, never used now except for dinner parties, held its heavy furniture and chinaware like an enormous theatre. And here she was, small and injured. She wanted to share the warmth of the bourbon, talk to someone, let them hear her charm. But she couldn't call anybody now. Elspeth had seen to that. Elspeth had taken away all her friends. Tomorrow she would go to see the rector of the church, tell him these things. She had never been close to the man. The people in the church seemed to like him. As for herself she didn't really think the man believed in God. He just liked the way of life. It was a comfortable life and you got paid for it and invited to dinners. Why all those women played up

to him she had no idea. He used to fox hunt in Virginia. That was why they liked him, not because of God. Still, she would go to him. She needed someone now.

Everyone called the Reverend William Cuthbert "Bill". Such intimacy was never allowed in Tennessee where Cordelia was baptized and confirmed. The rector was always Mr. So and So. One would never have thought of calling the rector by a nickname.

"Bill", though, had roots in Charleston and in Virginia. He also had a wealthy background and a wealthier wife, which made the couple enormously popular with the social scene, such as it was, in Ashton. He also liked to ride a motorcycle. There he would go--from the rectory to the church. Zoom!

He also laughed a lot and had very white teeth. He was a happy man with a completely unlined face, odd in a man in his early fifties. He also liked to talk about ships. At every funeral, everyone Cordelia had ever attended, he mentioned ships:

"Death is like a ship," he would say. "On one shore the people say 'there she goes' but on the other shore the people say 'she comes! she comes!'"

Cordelia didn't like little sayings like that. For one thing she wasn't sure whether she believed in any of it or not. She honestly didn't believe that when she died she was going to see John Henry and her mother and father. As a

matter of fact, she believed she would rather see some of her other beaux rather than John Henry, sweet man that he was. Her other beaux were just more exciting. She had got too used to John Henry.

At any rate she drove to the Parish House to see "Bill". She had made an appointment for three in the afternoon. She purposely chose the hour because by mid-afternoon her dizzy spells mysteriously disappeared. It was in the morning and later afternoon that she suffered what Jim Amory called hyperventilation, in which she thought she could not breathe.

Before she entered the Parish House she spotted the motorcycle. How could anybody with the fine connections this man was supposed to have ride a motorcycle? It said something stale. She didn't know exactly what. White trash probably. White trash with money, which was worse. But he did have the Cuthbert name.

When she entered the office there was Bill with his white collar and teeth rising as she entered. How could she bring her sorrows into such cheer? For God or something gave cheer to this man. He never frowned, never appeared to search. He was "happy". Everlastingly "happy".

"Well, Cordelia," he boomed. He boomed even when he wasn't in the pulpit.

Cordelia met his grin with a smile of her own. It was forced, of course, the smile. The room was too bright. She would rather have had a cozier atmosphere, one without a cross on the wall. She didn't like people who put crosses on

walls. She didn't think Jesus would have done that.

There was a chair in front of his glass-topped desk and Cordelia hung her purse on the back of the chair, then sat down with some difficulty. The chair was too high and her feet dangled. She felt she was looking into a lighted lightbulb as she met Bill's radiant blue eyes. His full head of hair was prematurely white, which made his ruddy complexion more so.

"Now what has been on your mind, Cordelia?" He glanced at his watch.

"I'm just going to come right out with it, Bill. Elspeth's been on my mind."

"Elspeth?"

"You may not know Elspeth. She's my daughter, you know. Doesn't come to church. She's an intellectual."

"Of course! Elspeth!" The teeth flashed and he touched the tips of his fingers together as if in joy.

He had no idea who Elspeth was. Lying. A clergyman sitting up there tapping his fingers, lying.

"I've heard so much about Elspeth." He looked away, at ~~the~~ picture of Jesus. "I've never had the pleasure of meeting her."

"I see." Cordelia regarded the purse hanging at her side. It was worn.

"So, how is Elspeth?"

It was too much. The tears came in a rush and she shoved a handkerchief to her nose, all the while regarding Bill's

blue eyes, alarmed and ashamed all at once. "I'm sorry," she managed.

Bill rose from his chair and came to stand beside her, patting her shoulder. "It's all right. It's normal to show our emotions." Pat. Pat.

Cordelia lifted her head and shook it. "I'm all right. Thank you." She had no idea what she was thanking him for. Perhaps the little pats.

"Cordelia. Cordelia." said Bill, as he made his way back to his elegant desk. He sat. "How can I help you? Our Lord doesn't put on us more than we can bear." He smiled winsomely. "That's true."

Hattie. That's what Hattie had said. Bill wasn't any smarter than Hattie.

But all at once she blurted out the story, even going into Elspeth's background, her peculiarities, her isolations. She told him everything she knew about Robert, about her suspicions, his background, her sleepless nights. "She's sinned, Bill. My daughter's no better than a whore." She looked from his eyes when she said the latter.

Bill just sat, shaking his head. "The times we live in. I wonder if there is nothing sacred."

"But what can I do?"

"By the waters of Babylon. Yea, I wept when I remembered Zion." Bill quoted.

"What has Zion got to do with Elspeth?"

"Perfection lost," said Bill.

Cordelia had no idea what the man was talking about.

"There's nothing you can do, I fear. Perhaps Elspeth herself will see the path she has chosen. Church, of course, is the answer. But that's up to her. We don't force people to come to church." He began tapping his fingers again.

"But, meanwhile, I'm concerned about you. Your health, well being. I'm so pleased you've told me all this. I'm always here. Should we say a little prayer together?"

It was embarrassing. She and this happy Bill praying together. She rose. "Not just now, I think."

Bill's regard was one of confusion. He looked up at her as she stood before the desk. Obviously his prayers had never been refused before.

"I'll just have to talk to God myself," said Cordelia. She did not want to say she didn't know whether He was up there or not, if any of it was a waste of time. Flesh was stronger than spirit. She had come to believe this. In a way.

Bill opened the office door for her and followed her outside the Parish House. Once outside they ran straight into May Beth Hughes. The woman was everywhere, thought Cordelia. On the phone, at parties, at church. But what was she doing here?

"Well, halloooo," said May Beth, eyeing Cordelia with her puffy slit eyes.

"Hello, hello," boomed Bill in his baritone voice, as if greeting May Beth Hughes was like greeting the Second Coming.

"How you?" said Cordelia stiffly. She did not want to be seen in the company of Bill. She continued to walk.

Bill walked with her to the car. "Be with you in a second," he called back to May Beth Hughes, who was stalled, staring.

He opened the door for Cordelia. "Peace," he said as she sat behind the wheel.

Peace, she thought. That was what the church had started up at Morning Service. Everybody had to shake hands and say "peace" to each other. Old Frank Henley refused to shake hands and one time he said "piss" right out loud so that the entire congregation heard him. But Frank Henley was getting old and peculiar.

Cordelia started the car. It was May Beth Hughes she was thinking about. Why was she seeing Bill? Did May Beth Hughes suffer? The world was too confusing to live in, she decided, and drove off.