

## Chapter Nine

The pacing began again. Cordelia watched from the drawing room as Elspeth daily paced the front and back halls. She was the epitome of John Henry, leading now with her stomach just as her father had done. Pace. Pace. Each day the stomach grew larger.

They were prisoners in their enormous house. Cordelia, pleading ill health, resigned from everything: the garden club, the study club, the altar guild, entertaining and even church. Elspeth went nowhere. The doctor had told her to walk, but of course he knew nothing of the girl's pacing. That was enough exercise to deliver twins, Cordelia told Hattie.

So they were, indeed, prisoners. Bill Cuthbert, the rector, came to call. Cordelia saw him outside the gate and hurried Elspeth upstairs. She, alone, met his beaming

presence. May Beth Hughes was responsible for the visit, Cordelia knew. May Beth called frequently, threatening visits from time to time. But Cordelia explained that Elspeth was living at home again, as if this somehow explained her withdrawal from the world. Robert, she said, had been assigned to another post and Elspeth was waiting for him to get settled before she joined him. Elspeth, she said, was taking care of her mother. "So fine. Elspeth oughtta been a nurse instead of a librarian."

"But don't you want company? I have some lovely flowers I wanted to bring by."

May Beth Hughes did not want to bring any flowers by, Cordelia knew. She merely wanted to pry.

"Not just now, dear," Cordelia said. "I just feel I must be by myself for a while. I'll let you know."

But now as Cordelia stood at the door she crumpled a handkerchief in her fist, determined to use it from time to time as testimony to her illness. She cracked open the door.

"Helloooo," boomed the greeting. "Is this the sick house?"

Cordelia opened the door slowly and drooped her shoulders. "Come in, Bill," she said sadly.

"Well," said Bill, as he stood in the expansive hall. "We've been missing you. Thought I'd better do some investigating." He regarded Cordelia closer. "You look fine, Cordelia. Just fine. How are you feeling?" His teeth flashed in the darkened hallway.

She said it was the "silliest" thing. The doctors could find nothing wrong, but she had these ridiculous attacks of dizziness. "It's frightening, you know." She said she dared not go anywhere, really, and that she was lucky to have Elspeth and Hattie to lead her from room to room. "But do stay for a visit. I'm glad to see you." She preceded him into the drawing room, forgetting her affliction.

The two sat--Cordelia humped over on the high Sheraton sofa and Bill, one leg crossed over the other, in the low armchair covered in a bloom of chintz.

He was saying he had an aunt who had dizzy spells. "Wasn't anything but an inner ear problem."

"Yes, well. The doctors don't seem to know what it is." She thought of that fool doctor telling her she had alcohol problems.

Bill must have read something of her thoughts. "You do seem worried, Cordelia. Are you concerned about yourself? Maybe you should go to a clinic somewhere. New Orleans, maybe."

Cordelia said she didn't need any clinic. And then with all her good intentions it just came out:

"Elpeth's pregnant." She took out the wrinkled handkerchief and held it to her nose. "And not a husband in sight. I'm so ashamed," she said into the handkerchief.

When she looked up Bill Cuthbert's customary beaming face was bright red. His eyes actually popped as he stared at Cordelia.

"What am I going to do? The man just ran off. Elspeth's heard nothing from him." She wadded the handkerchief in her lap.

"God will find a way," said Bill, seemingly recovering from his shock but still not regarding Cordelia. "He usually does."

"No, he doesn't," said Cordelia. "God hasn't done one thing for me. I've done it all myself. And now I'm tired."

"Who gave you this house? God did."

"My in-laws gave me this house. God didn't have a thing to do with it."

Bill leaned back in the chintz. "Faith that passeth all understanding," he quoted from the Book of Common Prayer. "He works in our lives more than we mere mortals know."

Cordelia sat up straighter. "I'm sorry," she said. "I've just been so worried. I'm really a religious person."

"Of course you are," boomed Bill. "Of course!"

"We're not equipped here," Cordelia said.

"Oh, of course you are."

"I mean to care for a baby. Or," and she stared fiercely at the man, "to meet this mean gossiping town."

Bill Cuthbert appeared to ponder. Then:

"Think of what our Lord endured. Think of that."

"He did not live in Ashton, Georgia."

"He looks over our town, though." He smiled a sweet smile as if Ashton were Bethlehem.

Cordelia said she knew that having a baby out of wedlock wasn't the sin it was in her day. But it was still disgraceful. "All everybody does is just sit around waiting for something bad to happen. They pretend they care, but they really enjoy the bad things. For others."

Bill said he thought Cordelia was becoming cynical in her judgment of others. People surprised him all the time, he said, with their kindnesses and charity. Goodness, he had discovered, comes from the most unlikely sources. Cordelia would discover that, too. "Would you like me to talk to Elspeth? Counsel her?"

"No, no. That won't be necessary." Cordelia knew Elspeth's opinion of Bill Cuthbert. More than once she had said Bill Cuthbert was a grinning fool. Cordelia couldn't take a scene of that sort.

"Then let's you and I have a little prayer. Prayer changes things."

Cordelia said she didn't think prayer could change anything upstairs.

And Bill looked up at the ceiling, his eyes closed and his head still tilted upward.

"Bring strength to Cordelia Newman, O God. Let her see the wisdom of your ways and look beyond this little city. May she think Eternity. And bless the mother-to-be, Elspeth Newman, whose trials are very great at this moment. Bless the unborn child. Give it health and courage and, above all, love for Thee. We are grateful. A-men."

It was a made-up prayer. Cordelia had never heard an Episcopal rector give a made-up prayer. Usually they quoted from the Prayer Book. But for the moment she felt some release. It was the first time she had talked to anyone but Hattie about her troubles and there was release in that.

"Thank you, Bill," she said.

"Well," he boomed in an entirely different voice. "I must be going." He rose from the chair.

Cordelia also rose. The man was enormous, making Cordelia feel small again as she did when she stood before Elspeth.

"Now, Cordelia," Bill said, placing his hands on her sloping shoulders. "I'm pleased you spoke to me about these things. Call me. Call me any time."

"Thank you," she said again. But she was thinking she needed a drink. All this had been emotional and she needed the drink to quiet her.

She saw him to the door, waved her wadded handkerchief as he drove off on his motorcycle, a silly sight--a man of the cloth with his collar, riding a machine like a common nothing from California or somewhere peculiar.

She closed the door, glanced upward and made her way to the kitchen where, blessed, the amber bottle rested on the pantry shelf along with various wines and vodkas.

Once in the library she sipped the warming brew and contemplated her talk with Bill. The prayer was embarrassing, sitting in her drawing room with all the familiar furniture

about and Bill praying for her and Elspeth and "it", who was to come. Prayers shouldn't be made in drawing rooms. Prayers should be made in churches--or closets. She formed an image of herself kneeling down in her closet with all her coats and skirts and moth balls hanging over her head and praying for herself and Elspeth.

She sipped another swallow and---

"Has he gone?"

Elspeth, her stomach swollen like the mistake it was, stood in the doorway, one arm stretched upward as she held onto the upper pane in the door. It always surprised Cordelia how long Elspeth's arms were. She looked wrong standing there, crooked somehow.

"I'm having a little drink," Cordelia chirped. She didn't want the admission to sound like a confession.

"I see. I could smell it all the way upstairs."

"Won't you join me? Oh, I guess not. Not in your condition."

Elspeth sat uneasily on the red leather sofa. She sat with her hands together, as if in prayer. "I've been thinking," she said.

"Oh?" Elspeth had a nice profile: straight nose, firm chin, classic.

Elspeth regarded Cordelia with soulful dark eyes. "I think I need to go away somewhere."

Cordelia placed her drink on the coffee table. "Go away?" She stared at the girl.

Elsbeth firmed her lips and nodded her head, then she regarded Cordelia. "Robert's not coming back and abortion is out of the question."

"Why?" asked Cordelia and instantly regretted the question. It sounded unfeeling, but in her heart of hearts she wished Elspeth would do just that, have an abortion and then everything could be just as it had always been. Normal.

"For one thing it's too late. And besides that--" She raised her hands. "It doesn't matter. The point is I think I should leave, go somewhere and have this baby. It would save you a lot of grief."

Cordelia took up her drink again. "I don't have a thing in this world to do with any of this. Where would you go?"

"There are places." She said her gynecologist could be of help. "Actually, if it were just I..." She puffed up a pillow on the sofa and replaced it. "...I wouldn't mind going back to the school, back to work, have the baby, let the world know."

"You'd be a role model," said Cordelia. Role model was a saying she often heard on television. "For the young girls, you know. They would look at you and think it was all right, having a baby out of wedlock."

Elsbeth turned to her but she was looking at the glass in Cordelia's hand, not at her face.

"Why in this world?" Cordelia asked, trying to distract her attention. "Why did you EVER get yourself in such a mess? I wish you could answer that. Didn't you see through the man? At all?"



Elspeth looked away. "I knew he was a free spirit---the army in itself was a part of all that." She sucked in her cheeks and ran her long fingers down her face. "I took my chances."

"I don't think Robert Browne was any kind of spirit at all, except maybe the devil." She knew she shouldn't have said that. She was feeling the drink.

Elspeth sighed. "But---" She emphasized the T-- "The point is I think I had better move on. Then you can have your life back again."

"And leave me here alone?" Cordelia felt the familiar fear like a cold hand.

"Better than the way it is now," said Elspeth, not looking at Cordelia but staring straight ahead at the unlit fireplace.

"You wouldn't have anybody to look after you. You'd be all alone. Those homes---I've seen them on television---are just full of girls you'd never want to have anything to do with---fast girls and prostitutes. You wouldn't fit in. Not at all, Elspeth. Look at me"

Elspeth faced her.

"Not at all. You need me and Hattie to see after you. Fix your meals. Tend to you." Suddenly she was weeping aloud, weeping like a child and she didn't care if Elspeth heard her or not. It was all too tragic. She was tragic. And she had tried so hard. Tried at everything. "Oh, God," she managed. "You know I've tried."

Elspeth remained and so did the pacing. Up down. Up down. As Elspeth's stomach grew larger and larger, Cordelia sometimes wondered if she were going to have twins. Maybe she would have quadruplets and they would be written up in the newspapers for all the world to see. Elspeth assured her that she was going to have a single baby only.

Cordelia decided to be sophisticated. Every book she read, every television play, every documentary blasted out that it was perfectly acceptable to live together without marriage and to have a family, if one so desired. Naturally, it was all a ninety-degree change in her own thinking and she didn't know anyone in Ashton, her friends she was thinking about, whose daughters had babies and "lived" with a man. The young women she knew all had huge weddings with ten or twelve bridesmaids. Mainly in the Methodist Church. It was a scene she used to dream for Elspeth.

But Ashton was a narrow little town and she, being from Tennessee, had a wider view. Some families in Ashton scarcely ever had been out of the town except for trips here and there. She was not like that. She had a perfectly reasonable sense of the world. Times had changed. They may not have changed in Ashton. But worldly people never batted an eye over a little alliance here and there. Besides, it just went to show that Elspeth was desired as well as worldly.

Of course she would never tell anyone how Elspeth waited for the mail or how she (Cordelia) had seen the letter addressed to Lt. Robert Browne with the local Fort's address and the demand "Please forward." The letter was returned and Elspeth took to her room. She stayed in there becoming, to Cordelia, a mere sound. The sound of the typewriter could be heard all day long.

But the news got out like a headline. March arrived and Cordelia's daffodils, hundreds of them planted on her hillside, were a sight for visitors to stop and admire. One day she was weeding behind her boxwood hedge and she heard two women talking. The voices were unrecognizable but refined, so Cordelia figured they were from out of town somewhere.

"This is the place," one of the women said. "Isn't the house gorgeous? And I think of Wordsworth every Spring when I see these daffodils."

"Perfectly lovely," said the other voice.

Cordelia was about to rise up and introduce herself, show the women she, too, was a part of it all--the lovely old house, the flowers. That was the way people often made friends, lasting ones. But then she heard:

"Peculiar people. They've lived in there like recluses ever since the daughter got pregnant. No husband in sight."

Laughter. "What is the world coming to?"

"Like something out of Faulkner."

"But it is beautiful."

Cordelia plunged her spade into the ground. "Peculiar

people," she mumbled. She and Elspeth were as normal as anyone she knew, if not more so. She listened as the car drove down the drive. But the thought struck her that if out-of-town people knew about Elspeth then certainly everyone in Ashton knew. She suddenly felt the ground sinking beneath her. She was a nobody and the ground was swallowing her up. Her position in the town was sinking, gone.

The thought was so disturbing that all aspirations to sophistication were dismissed. Instead, she clenched her teeth together, setting her jaws, and decided she had to have a dinner party. Invitations from her had stopped completely and she had to admit she missed everybody.

Elspeth would have to stay upstairs. Cordelia would mention that she believed it would be a good idea if she didn't type during the dinner because the sound was so loud. "Instead of a baby crying it would be the typewriter crying." A little joke that Elspeth did not respond to.

"You can't hear the typing downstairs, especially with all those loud mouths drawling away."

"When you're pregnant you sometimes get irritable," Cordelia said. "Besides, if you don't have people over occasionally people start thinking you're peculiar or something."

"How true," said Elspeth and dismissed Cordelia by climbing the stairway sideways.

Her dining room table, with the leaves in, could seat fourteen. She would ask only the best, of course: the

Bococks, the Whitfields, the Ewings, the ones she didn't really owe but who would make the dinner a fete at best. She might even ask Bill Cuthbert and his wife, though she believed he was the one responsible for spreading the gospel of Elspeth's pregnancy. She couldn't think of another soul who could have got the word out. The idea of his coming here, praying over her and then dashing out in the street to hail the news galled her so she planned then and there not to invite him. Or his rich wife.

But for now she decided to have a little drink and think the whole thing over. She couldn't just sink into nothingness. One had to fight sometimes, fight for survival. She didn't want to be completely forgotten in these latter years of her life. The idea was so frightening she rose up from her chair and, first, called Sarah Whitfield. She placed her drink on the table by the telephone and was disheartened by the Whitfields' refusal. They were leaving for Charleston next week.

"But we must get together, Cordelia," Sarah Whitfield said. "I haven't seen you in an age."

The Bococks were having visitors. They, too, could not come. Cordelia placed the receiver down and picked up her drink. They just don't want to come, she said to herself. The word was out, planted: she and Elspeth were peculiar, soiled. The house had dirty edges. No one wanted to come. It was this way for widows and sinners. A joyless lot.

"If you ask me I think you need to put the cork on the

bottle."

So lost was Cordelia in her reveries that she failed to see Elspeth enter the library. How she could miss her was beyond her comprehension; the girl had fairly doubled.

"They won't come," she muttered, still holding onto her glass.

"You seem to be doing a good bit of that lately." Elspeth was hanging onto the door panel again, making her stomach greatly in evidence.

"Dizzy spell again," Cordelia said but the remark caused her to set her jaw again. She did not like subtlety. It would be better to just say "you're drinking too much," not these little hints and innuendoes.

"That's not going to help anything," Elspeth said as she left on her way to the mail box, no doubt. It was twelve o'clock and the postman was rarely late.

Cordelia tapped her foot. Maybe she was drinking too much. But when everything got normal again she would stop. There were just too many crises now and the little drinks helped to ease the way, let her see more clearly the paths she must take.

She heard the front door shut and then a long silence. Usually Elspeth brought Cordelia her mail. Bills mostly. It was a routine that Cordelia wished would stop. The sight of the bills ruined lunch for her. She would rather find them after lunching.

She heard Elspeth making her heavy way up the stairs.

Perhaps there was no mail. Not even one of those worrisome catalogues she was getting nowadays. Impossible. She placed her drink aside and went out into the hall. On the table was a neat pile of bills and the catalogues.

Something was wrong. She could sense it. She stared at the pile of bills. Upstairs there was silence. No typing, no pacing. Just a sick silence.

Cordelia climbed the stairs slowly. Elspeth's door was closed, but that was not unusual. Elspeth never left her door opened.

"Elspeth?" Cordelia gently knocked on the door.

Silence.

The baby! It was coming too soon. Cordelia flung open the door. Elspeth was seated at her desk, a letter hanging from her hand. It was a written letter, not typed. So it wasn't something from the school or the library.

"Is something wrong? Are you all right?" The sight of the girl, sitting and staring at the blank wall was intimidating. Elspeth never liked anyone to pry.

"Robert's married." She did not move, just sat staring at the wall.

Cordelia could not move either. She stood there, saying nothing, her mouth open. The silence, only, seemed to speak.

Finally Elspeth folded the letter and thoughtfully replaced it in the envelope.

"Where is he?" Cordelia could not conceal the anger in her voice.

"In New York. He is out of the army. He's a married man now." She almost sang the latter, a quaint little ditty, not revealing the heavy emotion the room and events orchestrated.

Cordelia stared at her daughter. The familiar emotion was invading her body. It was like a great weeping inside. The sight of her child suffering was unspoken pain. Helpless. In no way could she help. She could only watch.

"So--" said Elspeth, rising from her chair and glancing at Cordelia. "That is that!" She emphasized the last "that" with a pat on the desk chair.

"He was nothing, Elspeth," Cordelia heard her voice oddly deep. "I feel sorry for the woman who married him. You're missing nothing. Not one thing. Good riddance!" Her eye caught Elspeth's enormous stomach. "I'd make him pay. That's his child inside you. I'd make him pay every inch of the way."

"He's going to Europe to live. France."

"Is that what he said?"

"That is what he said." Elspeth rubbed the back of her neck with both hands. "Now, if you'll excuse me. I have work to do."

It was the expression on her face, in her eyes, a certain wild hurt like fire that came and went in an instant, that caused Cordelia to rush to the girl, put her arms about her.

"Elspeth, Elspeth."

Elspeth said nothing for a while, then pushed away.

"It's all right. It's over. Done. It's all right."



"What will the town say now?" It just came out. She hadn't even been thinking about the town. "But I don't care," she added.

Elspeth moved from her, her mouth turned downward. She sat at her desk again and opened her typewriter.

"I hate this town," Cordelia said. She wanted to erase her terrible error. "They're all so small. Not a broad person anywhere. I wish I had never come here. Should have listened to Mother. She wanted me to stay in Tennessee. Could have married well, married money." She was chattering and all at once she realized Elspeth was looking at her, studying her face microscopically. "I'm so sorry, Elspeth."

"There are so many regrets in our lives, aren't there?" Elspeth's long gaze did not change.

Cordelia said she didn't have any regrets. There were so many things to be thankful for, a beautiful roof over their heads, even the coming baby, whose blood would be at least half theirs. She added that Elspeth had been the joy of her life and she had happy memories of John Henry. "All good things."

Elspeth turned to her open typewriter, saying nothing.

Cordelia saw the letter resting there by the typewriter. She knew perfectly well that as soon as she left Elspeth would read the letter again and again. Cordelia knew she too would read it. Simply to help her child. And her grandchild. Then she could figure out what to do.

"You've got to take care of yourself," she said aloud.

"Disappointments and things like that can affect the whole body. I read that by a renowned doctor. He said sadness and disappointment can make us all sick. Even affect your baby. You don't want that." She added that she could gladly kill "that Robert."