

Chapter Ten

Royal Viking Sea
en route Atlantic

Dearest Els,

Simply put: I thought I was in love with you. But when I left that feeling disappeared. You deserve to hear from me, at least.

I'm married, headed to France to write and think out my life that has amounted to so little thus far. I think you would like Abigail. She's a fine artist in a world where there are so few.

I hope you have the strength to receive this news and that you will continue with your writing, which is so fine. And so are you. Truly.

Love,
Robert

Cordelia replaced the letter in the envelope and tiptoed downstairs even though Elspeth was not in the house. Nor was Hattie. Elspeth had gone to the doctor, and Hattie was down with her "sugar", a disease only recently diagnosed and one which Cordelia feared would have her down permanently.

Nevertheless, she tiptoed to the kitchen. The letter had jarred her so that the only thing to calm her was a little drink. "Wretch," she said aloud as she tiptoed. How could a man possibly be so mean, so unfeeling? He knew how sensitive Elspeth was. Any fool could see that. But then Robert Browne was just that--a fool.

"Wretch," she said again as she tiptoed to the library, glass in hand with the delightful fumes of bourbon wafting to her nostrils. Now she had some hard thinking to do. It absolutely could not get about the town that Elspeth had been jilted. She wasn't thinking of herself. She was thinking of Elspeth. The girl didn't need any more suffering, no ridicule, no gossip that she might overhear.

The only thing to do was to go somewhere. She and Elspeth could go over to Athens nearby and find a place to stay until Elspeth's time arrived. They could find rooms somewhere in a nice old place somewhere. There were such things. Refined older widows sometimes let rooms, especially in college towns.

And when they returned Cordelia would announce to everyone that she had at last become a grandmother. People get used to things, she reasoned. In time they would forget the child had no father. Towns were like that. The old scandals became almost normal in time.

The child would grow up, beloved and cherished and--

Suddenly Elspeth was in the room again. Sneaking. Always sneaking and now spying, spying her drink.

"The child will be cherished and beloved, Elspeth," Cordelia said, trying to calm the jolt her presence had brought on. She had her left hand to her breast. With the right she held the glass.

"June," Elspeth said.

"What about it?" asked Cordelia, putting her drink aside like an abandonment. She would have to take to drinking in her room. Elspeth was everywhere.

"The baby." Elspeth sat with difficulty on the leather sofa. "A June baby."

"My goodness. Not a bride, but a baby. Everything's all backwards nowadays."

"Un huh."

Cordelia turned to Elspeth inspired. "I've been thinking--"

"Really?" Elspeth asked.

"Sarcasm is not your strong point, Elspeth. It never has been." She pulled a loose string from her jacket. "I've been thinking that you and I should make a little visit--say about May."

Elspeth asked why they should make a little visit. And Cordelia said she had been thinking again and that she knew Elspeth didn't want to have the baby here, that they could go to Athens and find some lovely rooms somewhere and Elspeth could have the baby away from the prying eyes of Ashton.

Elspeth yawned. Actually yawned.

"Do I bore you that much?" Cordelia did not like her

enthusiasms to be met with blandness.

"Hundred every day," Elspeth said. "Young girls everywhere have babies without men being in the way. What's so different about me? This is all still getting to you, isn't it?"

"Well, you're not just anybody, Elspeth. You're somebody, a leading citizen of Ashton. You should be an example of propriety."

Elspeth slowly picked up the needlepoint pillow, then replaced it with more force than necessary. "Well, I have things to do. I'll leave you with your thoughts and--" She glanced at the drink. "Speaking of propriety," she added.

"I don't like that, Elspeth. The doctors all told me a little drink now and then was good for my nerves, my heart. You act like I was some drunk or something."

"Yes, well. Onto other things." She rose with difficulty, holding onto the arm of the sofa.

"Well, what do you think?" asked Cordelia. She was thinking that Elspeth looked as if she would deliver tomorrow, not in June.

"If it makes you happy, relieves your mind--do whatever you want. I could go on my own, actually."

Cordelia said she wouldn't think of letting Elspeth go through "all that" alone. She said a woman in labor needed a loved one near. "Mine was so bad---the pains and all---I could have had you in downtown Ashton with the whole town looking on. It was terrible. Horrible."

For a moment she thought she detected fear in Elspeth's dark eyes. But then Elspeth had never displayed fear of any sort.

"Of course, things are different now," Cordelia continued, "they give you things."

"Yes, well--on to the typewriter."

"Are you going to answer that letter?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I do." Cordelia pointed her finger at Elspeth's stomach, "That needs a father and money. Support."

"What would you have me do? Bring him back in chains?"

"Mercy, Elspeth. I'm just trying to be practical about things."

"Indeed." Elspeth gave a little bow and exited from the room.

Cordelia took up her drink again. It was embarrassing having Elspeth make remarks about her drinking as if she were some common alcoholic. If it weren't for her occasional drinks she didn't know how in this world she would get through these coming months and days. Everything was terrible and she was all alone with it. If only Elspeth would say something, reveal herself, show some emotion. Cordelia had no idea what the girl was thinking. Or suffering. She didn't know how to help. A mother and helpless.

"Things will work out," she muttered aloud to the empty room. "They always do. Things come to an end."

But on Thursday she suffered a further blow. She was not

invited! There it was in black and white, a huge headline: Cordelia Newman was left out. It might as well have read that way. Each day Cordelia turned first to the women's section of the newspaper. She always wanted to know if something had happened that had not included her.

And there it was: Bob Eubanks' sixty-fifth birthday and everyone in town was included, brought funny presents and made little jokes, all his good longtime friends, and she was not there!

All this was written up in "What's Happening", a fluff column written by a former society editor. The newspaper did not have society editors any more. They were called Features Editors now, but the weddings and the "happenings" were written up in the section anyway.

The Eubanks had been Cordelia's friends for decades. She was not their closest friend by any means but never in the past would she have been left out of a party as public as a large birthday. The Eubanks were the uncrowned royalty of Ashton society.

Bob Eubanks owned Eubanks Textile Mills and one had the feeling the Eubanks were just visiting in Ashton, that they actually didn't live here. The world was their home and the worldly came to visit. If the Eubanks were not present at a gathering the event was a failure.

And here she was. Left out. She rested the newspaper on her lap and leaned her head back on the Chippendale chair. She was buried in this house. Forgotten. Nobody cared. That

horrible Robert had caused all this. She knew what he was when she first saw him, the first glance. That had been the way it was throughout her life. First impressions never failed. Even if she formed another opinion as time went on she always ended up with the first impression.

"Slick" was what she had first thought. And that was what he was. He had come here on a luckless day and ruined their lives, including his unborn child's. The infant would be nothing in the town. It would garner complexes and become an adult failure, maybe even a criminal.

Self-esteem was a saying she had recently learned from television. Every criminal who appeared on talk shows said they were like they were because of "low self-esteem." If they axed their grandmother it was because of----

On and on. Ashton would give her grandchild a low self-esteem. If you were left out of everything you were bound to think something was wrong. Elspeth had a low self-esteem, Cordelia reasoned. That was why she had done what she had done, given herself to a worthless no good. She had sought high esteem and was given something lower than even God had arranged for her.

It was all so hopeless Cordelia decided she would not even go to the grocery store. Hattie could do that. By not being seen anywhere people might think she was ill. And illness was her reason for not being included in things, not her lack of charm and station.

Being included was a woman's highest task in life.

Cordelia knew this. Her mother had taught her that as a child and it had stuck through the years. She noted prominent people were everywhere. None were recluses or stayed in their houses all day. They were out, up and away, doing things, invited here and there. They were what she should have been. She wasn't born to be stuck away in a mean little small town. That had not been God's plan for her. She was meant for greatness.

She studied the cruel column in her lap again. And the image came: She saw the occasion and everyone arriving, wearing black tie and long dresses. A string quartet gave further lift to the night. It was a dagger to the heart.

And here she was, in contrast, sitting alone (she might as well be) in this smothering house, worrying, planning, heartsick. She was like an old sick dog, unwanted, where all about her there was merriment, beauty and glamour. And all of it because of one common vulgar soldier.

"It takes two to tango," Elspeth had said the other night when Cordelia was raging about Robert Browne. She didn't know what Elspeth was talking about. The tango went out with the twenties, before she was born even. Certainly she and Robert didn't do the tango in that run-down apartment where they lived.

Sitting there with the wrinkled column in her lap she decided she would be big. She crumpled the paper in her hand and rising from the chair threw it into the waste basket. "We weren't put here on this earth to be happy." Her

grandmother's voice came back to her.

Cordelia had never believed that. Until now. She decided instead of going to silly parties and such she would now launch out onto a path of goodness. For others. She might even be written up for it. Praises would come from everywhere and all those people at the Ewings' party would look into their souls and feel diminished by such true greatness.

But "good" started at home. She would first place all her attention and kindness on Elspeth and the coming baby. Yes, she decided, that was the answer. But on her way she heard the mailman thrust the day's delivery into the mailbox. She would help Elspeth by getting the mail and if there was something for her she would walk all the way up the stairs and personally deliver it. Elspeth's largess was making it increasingly difficult for her to manipulate the stairs.

But when she saw it, it struck her like a bee sting. A postcard from THAT MAN. TO ELSPETH! A married man writing postcards to another woman. There was a picture of the Cafe de la paix, which to Cordelia looked like nothing--just a lot of chairs and tables in front of a not too distinguished building and a waiter serving glasses of wine.

"Hi there," she read and was immediately reminded of that vulgar little man on television who was always bidding old fat women to reduce. He always greeted his unseen audience with the words "Hi there!" emphasizing the R. She hated that man and turned him off as soon as he yelled out his greeting.

And here was that Robert, made from the same clay, greeting Elspeth as if she were some overweight old woman. She read further.

"Empty Dreams" has been accepted for publication. Thought you would like to know. You were my chief critic when I desperately needed one. So, I feel the book is partly yours. We are having wonderful days here in my favorite city and plan to leave soon for the South. How are you? Write me in care of American Express. Paris.
Best, Robert

The heat smoldered in her as she stared at the card. She could never let Elspeth see this. She re-read the card again. His book published! And his child about to be born. Cordelia crumpled the card in her hand and stood for a long while thinking. Perhaps now was her chance to do good.

She would write that man and tell him what he had done. Elspeth would never write him. She knew that. Or if Elspeth did she would never mention the pregnancy. Well, that was what mothers were for. To help their daughters. Who knows? He might get the news, divorce his wife and marry Elspeth.

Of course, he would have to leave Paris and live here. He liked Ashton. At least he said he did. And since he had thought they were rich at least he could give the same appearance. Maybe his stupid book would make some money. Vulgar books always sold, and if Robert Browne knew anything he certainly knew about vulgarity.

She immediately went into the library and sat at her desk. "Dear" was a word she could not bring herself to write, so she started the note with a mere "Robert".

I am writing for Elspeth since I know she would never write herself. But you are soon to become a father. And since in real terms your child will be fatherless I thought you would like to know. It will arrive in June.

Cordelia Rutledge Newman

She reread what she had written, then tore up his card and ceremoniously took it to the garbage can in the back alley and dumped it. She felt almost as if she had dumped Robert Browne himself. She lifted one eyebrow and smiled to herself. Doing good was indeed rewarding. The postcard would have been a disaster for Elspeth. She might even miscarry.

But then the thought struck her that Robert might ~~not~~ answer her card. The possibility never came to her in her euphoria of writing. He didn't have the moral fiber to be accounted for. Having a child would just be a bother to him now that he was to become a published writer. Of course, he would never answer her. Still, she planned to be planted right at the door every day to receive the mail before Elspeth had a chance at it.

Her determination caused her to get in her car and drive straight to the post office, where without a moment's hesitation she stamped the note and mailed it. She drove in merriment. An early Spring had come to Ashton. And the town was a melee of color--yellows, pinks, violet, white and green everywhere. It was such a contrast to the darkness of her house that she decided to open all the shutters and bring Spring indoors once more. It would lift Elspeth's spirits as well as her own. They needed joy. They needed Spring.

She wanted to go upstairs and tell Elspeth that the two

of them needed Spring, but she heard the typewriter going and when that was occurring wild horses couldn't open Elspeth's door for anything. So she decided she should have a little drink. "A celebration," she muttered aloud. For she indeed had things to celebrate.

Since the typing was still heard upstairs she knew it was safe to have the drink in the library. So she sat there imagining Robert Browne's expression when he read her note. She pictured him standing in the American Express building, his dark eyebrows knitted, his mouth open in alarm and then hiding the note so that his homely wife could not possibly see it. The wife was bound to be homely. Who pretty would take to him? No one. Though Elspeth certainly had her good points, lovely eyes. Elspeth was aristocratic looking. And that, of course, was her true charm. A high spirited aristocrat. That's my Elspeth, she said to herself and sipped from the glass.

As May arrived Cordelia's spirits truly lifted. Her rose garden was in full bloom. All the other blossoms had gone by. But the roses cheered her and there was green everywhere. Cordelia was a springtime person. Elspeth was an autumn person and consequently those moods were growing darker.

They had one scare when Elspeth's blood pressure rose. They had to call the gynecologist off the golf course to see about Elspeth. Her face was swollen and she had dark patches on her brow and cheeks. The doctor placed her under

observation at the hospital and afterward Elspeth returned a frowning heavy-breathing mass of anger.

"Now you must cheer up, Elspeth," Cordelia told her. "Babies get the personalities of their mothers--the way the mothers are when they are pregnant." She added that she had seen this time and again, disagreeable mothers having disagreeable children.

Elspeth asked how she, Elspeth, had turned out the "hysterically happy" person she was. But Cordelia told her again there was no point in being sarcastic, that she had been so happy to have Elspeth that there was never one sarcastic or cross word spoken by her throughout her pregnancy.

"Having you was a different story," she said quietly. "The pain."

"You've said that before."

But Cordelia did not answer. There was something dark about pregnancy, just as there was something dark about Spring, roots awakening, living again and the ground swell of movement into life. She somehow sensed the coming of her grandchild in this manner. Like dark chords.

"It's gone be an old boy," Hattie said.

"How can you tell?" Elspeth did not want to know the sex of the child.

"The way she's carrying it. High up. Nothing in the world but an old boy."

As in most matters Cordelia believed Hattie. Hattie had

folk ways that were born in truth. She was always correct. Therefore it pleased Cordelia enormously that the Newman name would be carried on. Certainly Elspeth would never use the name Browne. That thought had never come to her before.

"Heavens," she said aloud and went into Elspeth's room. She was not typing. "You're not going to name the child 'Browne'. Are you?"

"Haven't decided."

"What do you mean you haven't decided? Certainly you wouldn't curse your own child by giving him the name of a man like that!" She added that the Newman name should be continued. She also hoped that if it were a boy Elspeth would name it John Henry. John Henry Newman. "Just like your father," she half whispered and the thought was so beautiful she felt her throat close with the effort to hold back the tears.

"And if it's a girl I can name it Cordelia," said Elspeth. "Cute."

"Don't," Cordelia said, the tears actually coming. "Don't be cruel to me, Elspeth."

Elspeth sighed heavily and then bent with a half cry.

Cordelia's tears instantly vanished and her heart banged in her chest. "Hattie!" she called like a stevedore. "Come here!"

Hattie slowly climbed the stairs and, at last, stood in the doorway. Cordelia had run out into the hall, repeatedly calling the woman's name. "Hurry up. Elspeth----"

Elspeth held both hands, flat like, against her hips. She was taking deep breaths, her nostrils spread.

"You allin?" asked Hattie, frowning.

Elspeth nodded.

Cordelia rose to the occasion: "All right now, Elspeth. We'll just be calm. Hattie, call the doctor, the hospital, say we're bringing Elspeth Newman to the maternity ward. What does she need?"

"She don't need nothing. Housecoat and slippers."

Elspeth bent again, her face constricted.

"Lawd, don't let her have it here," Hattie said, not moving, just staring at Elspeth's agony.

"I'll get the car," Cordelia said. Her nerves were so raw she felt like screaming. Her legs were shaking and her hands were unsteady. The baby was too early. It would be an eight months baby, stillborn. She hurried down the stairs and out the back garden to the garage, all the while thinking how much Elspeth wanted the baby. In the last weeks Cordelia could see a special light in the girl's face whenever the baby was mentioned. Cordelia understood. The baby would be hers, a part of her, an extension of her life. A part of her would always be on this earth. Hurry. She backed the car out the garage and drove round to the front of the house. No one was in sight. She got out of the car and climbed the stairs again. Elspeth was standing in the middle of her room, still breathing heavily and Hattie stood beside her holding John Henry's old worn out suitcase, the only one he

had. John Henry had never gone anywhere, not even to the hospital. He died in the downstairs bathroom, his eyes wide as if he were looking in a mirror.

"We'll have to help her downstairs, Hattie. You hold one side and I'll hold the other."

"I can make it," Elspeth managed, still rubbing her back with her open hands and long fingers.

Cordelia went down the stairs first, then Elspeth, followed by Hattie, frowning, with the suitcase. "Water isn't broke yet," said Hattie.

"Don't speak of it," Cordelia said. She had visions of water in the hallway, in the car. They would have to call an ambulance. Her mouth was dry, she couldn't think. The pain, the terrible pain her child would have to go through. Why did God make it this way? Why didn't he just let women sit on eggs for a while? Painful getting here and painful going out.

They reached the bottom of the hall steps and Elspeth, a seeming mountain before her, manipulated the hallway and the steps outside. Getting in the car was all but impossible. But Hattie suggested Elspeth get in the back seat. Hattie and Cordelia sat in the front seat and Elspeth, half lying in the back seat, began to groan.

Cordelia sped through the streets, ran a red light and finally reached the drive to the hospital's emergency room.

"Help! Help!" she shouted.

A nurse was quickly at her side, a country girl with bright red lipstick.

"It's coming!" Cordelia fairly shouted.

"Now set yourself down," said the nurse. "What's the matter, ma'm?"

Cordelia turned toward the door. Hattie and Elspeth, half limping and bent, were struggling to enter.

"There!" Cordelia pointed and the nurse immediately went outside and, taking Elspeth's arm, led her through the door and into the emergency waiting room.

The room was crowded with the sick and waiting. All were entranced with Cordelia, staring at her with open mouths, calculating.

Cordelia ignored them and went immediately to Elspeth and the nurse. "It's early," she said to the nurse. "A whole month early."

And then there were tears in Elspeth's eyes. The sight struck Cordelia like a leaving and she took Elspeth's other arm. "It's all right now, Elspeth. Sometimes they miscount these things. Don't they, nurse?"

The nurse said that sometimes was the case. "But we're gone be just fiiiiine. Just fiiiiine. You'll be having a healthy bouncin baby fore you know it. You gone be fiiiiiiiiine."

"She certainly is," said Cordelia, glancing backward. "Where's Hattie?"

Hattie had found a seat with the waiting patients and was calmly tapping John Henry's suitcase which rested at her feet. "Bring the luggage, Hattie," Cordelia called. "Don't just sit there."

Hattie reluctantly rose from her chair and came with the suitcase. "We gone be settin for a spell anyhow." She was frowning deeper. "That gull isn't gone deliver no first baby fore nightfall--if then."

The nurse led Elspeth into the same room Cordelia had been in when she had her attack of dizziness in the fall. Familiar territory. Cordelia entered the room first.

"You just wait outside," the nurse commanded Cordelia.

"What do you mean, wait outside? I've got to be with my child."

The nurse stopped and both she and Elspeth gazed down at Cordelia. The nurse was almost as tall as Elspeth.

"You stay outside or I'll have to call an orderly."

Suddenly, the two--the nurse and Elspeth--became four, a blurred four, and Cordelia felt as if all the blood were draining from her body. Then she heard Hattie:

"My Jeeeeezus, she done fell out!"