

## Chapter Eleven

When Cordelia opened her eyes a doctor she had never seen before was standing by her hospital bed. Her first thought was of Elspeth and she tried to sit up, get out of the bed, but the doctor, a young man with blue fish eyes, forbade her. She lay back down, exhausted, and stared at the man.

"Blood pressure's elevated." The fish eyes widened. "We want to get that down."

"But Elspeth--my daughter--is about to deliver an eight-months baby, her first, and she's in her thirties. Where's Hattie?"

The doctor said that he did not want Cordelia to be disturbed about anything. Or move. He said that her blood pressure was two hundred and fifteen over one hundred. "Way too high, dangerously so." He did not know who Hattie was and he was sure her daughter was in good hands.

"Hattie is an African-American and is in my employment."

She wanted the young doctor to see if he could find her. She wanted Hattie to be in the delivery room with Elspeth, see to her. The doctor said he didn't have time to find anybody, but perhaps Cordelia knew someone who could do that. He pointed to the telephone above her bed.

"I don't know anyone. We lead very quiet lives, you see."

The young doctor did not seem to be interested in that. He was talking to Cordelia about taking pills, eliminating salt and alcohol and being calm about daily living.

She wanted to shout at the man, asking him how in the world she could be calm with a daughter like Elspeth who was aristocratic but had got pregnant anyway and now was in danger of losing the baby and probably her own life as well. But she said nothing. She kept patting the sheet which lay over her. Then she realized she was lying there in her slip and the blue dress she had worn to the hospital was hanging in an open closet, hanging as if it were she herself.

The doctor wanted to know who her regular doctor was. And she told him, not completely forgetting that she had wanted to dismiss him for pronouncing her an alcoholic. But now she needed him. He would find Hattie for her. He wasn't too busy to do a little thing like that.

The doctor said he had just seen Jim Amory in the cafeteria and he would inform him what medication he had administered. And then Hattie walked into the room, still

carrying John Henry's suitcase.

"That's for Elspeth," Cordelia said immediately, indicating the suitcase.

And the doctor looked confused, said that he would leave now.

"They's working with her," said Hattie and for some unknown reason began to whistle.

"You should have stayed with her. Let the nurse in charge take the suitcase. She'll need those things."

"I never seen anybody fall out the way you done. You all right?"

Cordelia began drumming her fingers. "He says---that doctor says I have high blood pressure."

"Guess you gone fall out with a stroke? Some with high blood does. I knowed this woman...."

The thought of a stroke had never occurred to Cordelia but now the possibility was there. She saw herself nothing but a vegetable lying in a nursing home with no one there and the nurses would tie her down and she would scream night and day because of drugs administered by the thieving nurses.

"I have to try to be calm," was all she said.

"That's right." Hattie began nodding her head vigorously. "They wouldn't let me in the room with Elsbuth."

"Why not?"

"I guess cause I'm black."

Cordelia closed her eyes. "For heaven's sake, Hattie. That's all over."

"No, it aint."

"Yes, well, you go and see if you can't find Dr. James Amory---- I want him personally to conduct you into Elspeth's room. She needs a friend, needs you to see her through all this."

Hattie began whistling again.

"Take the suitcase with you. I'll be all right. They're giving me things. What a time for all this to happen."

"Just as well," Hattie said and walked toward the door.

"What do you mean by that?"

"What?"

"'Just as well'. What you said."

"Nothing." Hattie was mumbling to herself. "That woman don't need nobody right now."

"It's an eight-months baby," Cordelia said calmly.

But Hattie said doctors and women don't know everything. "They gets mixed up just like everybody else." The pronouncement caused her to frown, her usual mien.

"Well, run along now. Find Dr. Amory."

After Hattie finally closed the door Cordelia started to get out of the bed, but for the first time she realized she had a needle in her arm which was attached to tubing and a glass vessel filled with bubbles and water. She was affixed to the bed.

She wanted to find Elspeth and in spite of everything be with her. But that blue-eyed doctor had made that

impossible. She was a prisoner when, of all times, she needed to be free, to do good.

This is what it's like to be old, she said to herself. Always in hospitals, never allowed to do anything you wanted, shunned, embarrassed and forgotten. In her mind she heard Elspeth screaming with pain. She put her hands to her ears. How long, O Lord? How long will it be? "Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live," she quoted. She was thinking of Elspeth's pain and her own self being in a nursing home, tied down in a chair. The quotation seemed inappropriate.

"How you, hon?" A cheery nurse popped into the room. "Feelin any better?"

"My daughter's in great pain."

"What's the matter?"

"She's having an eight-months baby."

The nurse's smiling face did not change. "Now we musn't worry our pretty little head about something like having a baby. Why, that's how we all got here."

Cordelia did not like this nurse. She was fake, calling her face "pretty", though she was flattered even so. "I want to take this thing out of my arm."

"Noooo. That's giving us strength. You want to enjoy your grandbaby, don't you?"

Enjoy was a word Cordelia had heard little of in the past year. It had not occurred to her she would "enjoy" Elspeth's illegitimate baby. Her word mainly had been

"mourn". "Yes, I plan to enjoy the baby---if it gets here."

"There you go again---worryin bout thangs that don't matter a hill of beans. Your doctor wants you to be cheery."

"That's not my doctor. We weren't put on this earth to be cheery."

"Why!" The nurse regarded Cordelia in mocked surprise. "I'd be shamed. Of course He wants us to be cheery, happy. He's sad when He sees you all gloomy and everythang. He don't want you to worry about one single thang."

Cordelia said nothing. The young woman was making her nervous. Why didn't they teach these people in Nursing School to be calm and not lecture patients. She didn't care one thing about the girl's philosophy. Nurses like this could learn from patients.

"How long to I have to be here?" It occurred to her that she would have an enormous hospital bill. Hers as well as Elspeth's. She wondered if the library provided Elspeth with hospital insurance. It was terrible. Cordelia hadn't paid off the last visit to the hospital completely yet. Of course, insurance paid part but the rest was like being in the most expensive hotel in the world.

The nurse stuck a thermometer in Cordelia's mouth, then lifted her arm to take her pulse.

Cordelia started to mumble something, but the nurse shook her head. She was counting, couldn't be disturbed. Why hadn't John Henry left her more hospital insurance? Back then neither of them thought they would ever be sick. And

here was John Henry dead and she in and out of hospitals.

"Normal," said the nurse. "You're doin just fiiline. Keep this up and you'll be out of here in no time. When did you take your last pill?"

Cordelia told her.

"Well, in a little while we'll take another."

The door to the room slowly opened and Jim Amory entered happily smiling, followed by Hattie and John Henry's suitcase.

"Well, Cordelia, what is all this?"

Cordelia wondered why everybody was so cheerful. Of course Jim was always smiling like an idiot. That was natural. But even Hattie was smiling. It was a smile of pride, as if she were saying: It took Hattie to find Dr. Amory. And I did it!

"I need to get out of here. Elspeth's deliverin, Jim."

"She's all right. She's just fiiline."

"Mens," said Hattie, then started frowning again.

"It's premature," Cordelia said.

Jim didn't seem to want to talk about Elspeth and Hattie appeared to be in his way also.

Cordelia took the situation in hand. "Jim, can't Hattie help with Elspeth? She needs to be with the girl. Somebody has to be there."

Jim said that Hattie could, indeed, be with Elspeth and he told her where she was.

"Yessir," Hattie said, not looking at him but at

Cordelia. She didn't want to be with Elspeth.

"Elspeth is very fond of you, Hattie. You know that."

"They don't want me in there," Hattie said.

Cordelia was relieved she didn't say she was not wanted because she was black. That would take too much out of her to refute.

"You just go on now," Cordelia said. "Give Elspeth all the help she needs. It's so sad."

Hattie left and Jim sat in the chair opposite Cordelia so that she had to strain, turning her face toward him. The chair he sat in was lower than the high bed.

"Cordelia, yo blood pressure is just too high. What in the wuld have you been doing?"

"Nothing different," Cordelia lied. She did not want to say she had resigned from most of her activities and that she was not included anymore.

"YO're watchin things, aren't you?"

"Watching what?"

"Alcohol."

She hit her fist on the bed. "I'm tired of that, Jim."

"Pressure's too high."

Cordelia said nothing. Inside she was seething. As if she didn't have enough to worry about, this smiling doctor wanted to take away from her the one thing that gave her solace.

"And I know you are worrying about Elsbuth."

She turned from him and stared at the ceiling. "Yes, I am."



"Just let her go, Cordelia."

She looked at him. "What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

He said that Elspeth was old enough now and that she knew what she was doing. He believed that mothers were like birds and they had to let the little ones fly away one day.

"I'm no bird and neither is Elspeth," said Cordelia. "She needs somebody. That man just went off and left her and now she's about to miscarry."

"She's doing fine and is very brave. You should be the same. And stop worrying so."

"How do you know she's doing fine?"

"I've been in there. Everything's right on schedule." His face sobered. "I know all this has been an embarrassment to you, Cordelia. But you and I grew up in different times."

"I suppose," Cordelia said, his words actually reaching her with a soothing effect. The times had changed. She would have to tell everyone that. She was modern, not like the insular people who gossiped and talked in Ashton. Jim was correct. She liked him. He, too, was a father, probably had as many worries as she. He understood and she was grateful. She told him so. But somewhere beneath her, in this building, hers and John Henry's grandchild was entering the world. A great moving event.

After he left Cordelia lay in the bed thinking of her mother's death. Just why these thoughts appeared now she did not know. Birth was what she should be pondering, but for months now thoughts of her mother had been heavily on her mind. Spring often did this. Her mother's sense of beauty was like the Spring.

Her mother died in a Nashville hospital. But before her death Cordelia and she had had two months together, lovely days in which the two shared a lifetime of talk and memory. Cordelia brought little Elspeth to Nashville so that her mother could see her grandchild and the two of them lovingly admired the child and saw similarities in the baby's features. In Ashton they saw only Newman features.

When Cordelia first planned the trip to Nashville death was the last thing she had planned on. It was all meant to be a holiday away from Ashton. And John Henry. It was a lovely time. She and her mother sat together in the drawing room in the Rutledge house and drank sherry, talking of the old days. Her mother was only two months away from death but neither of them knew. It was pleasant being together with little Elspeth upstairs and Spring outside and everywhere dogwood and daffodil arrangements. Only sudden coughing spells brought the reality of dwindling days.

"I've never feared death," Cordelia remembered saying to her mother by way of encouragement.

"It's because you are so far from it," her mother said,

her face still pretty in its thinness. Cordelia had her mother's blue eyes. But she did not have the abundance of auburn (now faded) hair that was braided at the nape of her neck. Handsome, was what everyone called Elspeth Rutledge. And she was, even at the end.

The sherry was like a holy spirit entering their bodies. It soothed the roughness of time and made the bonding closer.

"I love you, Cordelia," her mother said.

And somehow there was embarrassment. Her mother was not given to sentimentality. But now it appeared she wanted to say this, must say it.

Cordelia said nothing. It was as if she were saying "good-bye." And the ache of her body at that moment was one that would never quite go away. Soon after her mother was in the hospital, unable to breathe, coughing, and a nurse helping her every movement, eating, bathing, the small attempts at walking.

Her mother had never seemed old to Cordelia. Almost to the end her movements were all spirited ones, full of life and joy. So the person lying in the death bed did not seem her mother at all.

Day after day Cordelia made her way to the hospital, bringing whatever she could find to bring cheer. The doctors were kind old friends, greeting Cordelia as if she had never been away.

Her mother died alone. Cordelia was not there. She never saw her dead. That was her own wish. She wanted to remember

the vibrance, the beauty and the presence of the life in her, not the dead. And so when it was all over she and little Elspeth returned to Georgia and Cordelia never again went to Nashville, though at the time she did not know it would be so.

Lying there thinking of all this Cordelia wondered what her mother would think now: she here with a drinking problem and high blood pressure and her granddaughter suffering the terrible pains of birth.

She would grieve surely. Cordelia had always drawn strength from her mother. Even the memory of her. And now she had to find it again. She was exactly the same age as her mother when she died. But people were living longer now. Cordelia often consoled herself with that. Still, it was an age that old habits were not easily broken nor courage an easy will to come by.

Still, she had to face herself. She had to be more temperate and she had to present a brave face to the world. In no way did she want anyone in Ashton to know she was anything but pleased about the birth of her grandchild. She would show the entire town what Elspeth actually was: a free spirit with worldly ways.

But now was now. She would face all that when she returned home. Now she had to worry about Elspeth. And lying in the bed thinking of death was helping nothing. She took the needle from her arm and carefully raised herself from the bed. The dress was not one of her best. (She

hadn't planned on a visit to the hospital.) But any dress was better than her slip.

She regarded herself in the mirror. She looked broken. Her hair was a mess with wisps sticking out here and there. What had the doctors and nurses thought of her, lying there as if she were one thousand years old? She patted her hair and looked about for her purse. There was none. She had been so harrassed she had forgotten to bring her purse, a thing she had never done in her entire life.

It didn't matter. None of it mattered. She left the room and stopped at the nurses' station. She asked for the room number of Elspeth Newman. She told the nurse that Elspeth Newman was having an eight-months baby. The country nurse, who had attended her earlier, did not recognize her. Which just went to show that some nurses, with all their baby talk, really didn't see their patients. Or care.

Elspeth Newman was in Room 201 in the Maternity Ward. Cordelia took the elevator and punched the button. She felt weak, exhausted, but she was pretending she was her mother and as such breathed deeply and smiled spritely at the empty elevator.

Once on the ward she heard screams, inhuman screams, and she held on to the corridor wall for support. Was that Elspeth? Her child? She went to Room 201, opened the door with a thrust to find only an empty bed and no one there. The bed was unmade, so there had been someone there and recently.

She turned and went to the glass partition.

"Elsbeth Newman?" she asked the nurse.

"In delivery," said the nurse and Cordelia did not like her tone.

"Where is that?"

"You can't go there, ma'm." The nurse did not even look at Cordelia. She was reading something.

"Well, will you go in there and tell her her mother is here?"

The nurse regarded her then. "I don't think she wants to hear anything right now. She's in labor." She frowned at Cordelia wonderingly as if she had suddenly discovered something.

"How will I know then?"

"Know what?"

"If my child is dead or not?"

The nurse put down the clipboard she was holding.

"Clara," she fairly yelled and another nurse, older, appeared at the partition. "Yes?" asked the older nurse.

"I am seeking information," said Cordelia, rising to a height.

"Yes?" asked the older nurse, examining Cordelia, obviously noting her wrinkled dress.

"I want to know how in the world I can find out about my daughter. She's in labor, a premature delivery."

"She's talking about Elsbeth Newman in 201."

"Oh yes." The older nurse, whose face was puffy, smiled

with yellow teeth. She came around from the partition. "Now let's just go to the waiting room and sit for a while. Your daughter's in fiine hands."

"Is it almost over?" She heard the timidity in her voice.

"We hope so. Don't we? Mrs. Newman is a very brave woman. Very cooperative. Not a whimper from her."

Cordelia, exhausted, wanted to weep at this praise. "How like her," she said. "Never complains. So brave."

The nurse led her to six rows of folding chairs. There were two large spittoons filled with sand and spots of blood near the chairs, also a coca cola machine. The chairs were hard and Cordelia wondered if she could possibly sit here for whatever time it took. And then she spied Hattie, still carrying John Henry's suitcase. Hattie looked tired, too, more tired than Cordelia had ever seen her. There were dark rings under her eyes and her hair looked almost white.

"You sittin here?" she asked Cordelia.

"I guess I am."

Hattie sat down beside her.

"Doesn't Elspeth need her things?" Cordelia was looking at the suitcase.

"That woman don't need nothing. They wouldn't let me stay. I told them you said stay but Elspeth she got a mean nurse... Mean. Kept telling Elsbuth to 'push' and that poor thang had tears in her eyes from hurting, but she wouldn't say nothing. They was this other woman in the room and you'd thought she was being cut in two the way she carried on."

Cordelia rose and turned her chair so that she would not have to observe the two filthy spittoons. "How long, Hattie? How long?"

"No telling. She in the livery room. Lord, God sho knew what He was doing when he put babies on this earth."

"What do you mean?"

"Born in pain and you got it till you dies."

Cordelia nodded. Hattie had, indeed, spoken the truth. "And the pain seems to grow worse as one grows older."

"You talking now," said Hattie.

They were silent for a while, dwelling on these things. Then Cordelia said:

"Hattie, do you realize I'll have a French grandchild?"

"Hush your mouth," said Hattie. "How come French?"

"That man was half French."

"Do say?"

"Yes. Strange events. The world is so strange. I never thought I'd have a French grandchild."

"Or one without no daddy neither," said Hattie.

"Don't speak of it." Cordelia turned to Hattie. "We mustn't ever mention that." She turned away. "Besides, Elspeth's worldly."

"Is?" was all Hattie said.

An elderly woman and a young man entered the room. The woman wore a flowered dress and had an obvious wen on her back. The young man wore short shirt sleeves and was badly in need of a shave. Hattie observed them, took in everything



and dismissed them with the raise of her head.

But the woman obviously had no such notions. She smiled broadly at Cordelia and nodded her head to Hattie. "How you?"

"I am fine. Thank you," said Cordelia.

"Buster Jr. here done got hisself a great big old boy. Born two minutes ago."

The young man flushed and grinned toothlessly, which for some unknown logic caused Hattie to start giggling. She crossed her feet but could not stop the giggling, then she abruptly picked up her chair and turned it, exhibiting her trembling back to the couple and Cordelia.

"What a happy occasion," said Cordelia.

But the couple were staring at Hattie.

"Hattie is not well," said Cordelia and she placed her finger to her lips.

"Yes'm," said the elderly woman and the two began to grin again.

"My daughter's having an eight-months baby."

"I declare," said the woman. "Is it going to live?"

"The nurses all assure me that it will."

"Yes'm," said the woman.

"How long he say we gotta wait out chere?" asked the young man.

"Not long. You itchin to see that baby?"

"Wanta see Bertha, see if she aint all tore up?"

The woman turned to Cordelia again. "Lawd, you'da thought

Buster Jr. here was having that er baby hisself. Nervous. You never seen nobody nervous as this boy."

"I fainted," said Cordelia.

"Did?" asked the woman.

Cordelia nodded. Hattie had calmed somewhat and Cordelia saw no reason to continue this innocuous conversation. She had merely been trying to cover for Hattie's rudeness.

"How come you fainted?" asked the woman.

"Nerves, I guess. I have elevated blood pressure."

"You got the high blood? Me too. Can't eat salt or eggs or nothin no more."

Cordelia looked down at her hands. She needed a manicure. As soon as all this was over she had to pay more attention to herself. She needed a shampoo and a pedicure.

"She feelin any better?" the woman asked, pointing at Hattie's back.

Cordelia put her finger to her lips again.

The woman nodded. She understood. Hattie was insane. "Got an old auntee like that. She don't know nobody." She pursed her mouth as if she were chewing and glanced up at the ceiling.

Cordelia said that she was sorry. She wanted to dismiss the woman. All her thoughts should be on Elspeth. Nobody else. "Come, Hattie, let's check with the nurses again. She rose from the chair, but as she did so a doctor dressed in a green outfit and looking slightly like an ageing wood nymph frowned into the room. "Mrs. Newman? Is there a Mrs.

Newman?" He was staring at the elderly woman with the wen.

Cordelia stared at the man. Elspeth was dead. The man looked so harrassed.

"I'm Mrs. Newman, doctor. What is it?"

Then, blessedly, the man began to smile. "Your daughter has just delivered a fine baby girl."

"Hallelujah!" shouted Hattie.

"A-men," said the elderly woman.

"Elspeth?" asked Cordelia. "How is she?"

"She's fine. A fine young woman."

"But it was premature."

The doctor said that it was not premature at all. Elspeth was confused with certain dates.

"Same thang with me," said the elderly woman.

Cordelia ignored her. Her relief was profound and inside she felt a healing as if her entire body had slowed its process.

"When can we see her? And the baby?"

"Any time," the doctor said.

And Cordelia went to the man, hugged him, thanking him for the gift he had brought. What she was experiencing, and she knew it, was joy. She had not felt such an emotion in decades. But now it was given to her and she let go of the stunned doctor and hugged Hattie, who was now clapping about the room, praising God and "Jeeeeezeus."