

Chapter Fourteen

Elsbeth was sitting in the ladder-back chair in the hallway. Her arms were crossed and she had the tight-lipped presence of one who is waiting, has been waiting--for an age. Her large dark eyes were slits.

"Well, we're up and about," sang Cordelia, playing a part again. One glance told her the whole story, and her own guilt was so profound she became almost mindless, her brain racing, planning, thinking, all to no avail. She started up the stairway.

"How could you do such a thing?" Elspeth's voice was low and shaking.

Cordelia turned, her eyebrows slightly raised. "What, dear?"

"Lie!" raged Elspeth.

Cordelia took hold of the bannister rail. She said nothing.

"I've just talked to Robert."

Cordelia sighed.

"Where are my letters?"

"There were only two." Cordelia heard the timidity in her voice like a pleading.

Elspeth rose from her chair, pointed her finger at Cordelia. "You had no right! You had no right!"

"Calm yourself, Elspeth." Cordelia rose to a height as she always did in crises. "Let's just be normal." She walked back down the stairs. "Come into the library and we'll discuss this like---" She started to say "sane" people. She did not finish.

Elspeth followed her into the library, her arms still crossed. Cordelia could feel her rage. What if the girl had a knife in her hand? Her fear was cold.

"Now," she said facing the red rage in Elspeth's face. She sat in the Chippendale chair and indicated the sofa to Elspeth. For a while she did not look at her daughter. Then, smoothing her dress, she regarded the staring face.

"Elspeth," she said, pronouncing the name slowly. "You have been very ill. I don't think you know how ill you have been. I've just come from Dr. Bodenheimer."

"What has that got to do with your outright thievery."

"Calm down. Calm down. Let me continue."

Elspeth stared at her with fine eyes for a moment and then looked away at the myriad of books lining the room.

"I am your mother. Therefore my first instinct, my

very first instinct is protection. You should know that. There's your little child out there. Would you want some terrible person to harm that little life?"

Elspeth looked back at Cordelia, frowning, and said nothing.

"Would you?"

"I don't think I have to answer that."

"Protection is a normal thing." Cordelia wished she had not used the word "normal." "Perhaps you should have a talk with Dr. Bodenheimer."

Elspeth tugged at the collar of her shirt and said nothing.

Cordelia wished Elspeth would take better care of herself. The old cotton shirt and long black skirt did not seem to fit her. She even had her bedroom slippers on. Cordelia was thinking that grooming might help Elspeth's mind. She read somewhere that insane asylums had hair dressers and cosmetic artists to make the patients feel better about themselves. It made sense. Going around looking unkempt and dowdy helped nothing at all.

"Robert's coming."

Cordelia actually moved the chair when she faced Elspeth. "Here!? He's coming here?"

"Apparently he's got a very good advance on his book."

Cordelia smiled to herself. "Then he's able to help us support little Elspeth."

"I wish you would drop that word."

"What word?"

"Us?"

"Oh Elspeth." It was a little cry. The girl could be so cruel.

"This house is big enough. You stay in one part of it and I'll stay in another."

Cordelia stood. "All right!" She half shouted. Rarely did she shout at anyone. Her mother had always told her that was for fish wives. "All right!" she said again. "You can entertain your common man all by yourself. But don't let me see him!"

"Fine!"

But she was instantly sorry she had said that. She wanted to give the sorry thing a piece of her mind, tell him about money, how much he should give Elspeth. Elspeth herself would be all noble and upright. She would never ask for proper support.

She went straight to the kitchen and to the bourbon bottle. She poured two jiggers into a jelly glass and adding a little water she sipped the liquid. Gold, she thought. Bourbon was the only thing that was holding her sanity together. And now with everything else she had added anger to her emotions. She was tired of Elspeth. Tired of her accusations, her lack of understanding and the girl's anger. Elspeth had got herself into this situation. Her mother had not one thing to do with it. It was Elspeth who lay in the bed with that vulgar man and begot a child.

Cordelia rested the half empty jelly glass on the sink. She wished she had told Elspeth all that. But in further thinking she guessed Dr. Bodenheimer would not have approved of her saying anything.

She heard the back door slam. Out the kitchen window she watched as Elspeth approached Belle and the baby carriage. Belle was afraid of Elspeth and Cordelia watched as Belle looked everywhere but at Elspeth. She observed the sky and the trees and little Elspeth, but she watched as Elspeth picked up the baby. She watched with shrewd eyes, observing Elspeth's wrinkled shirt and skirt, sniffing at it all. It was not a sweet scene at all. Mother and child.

"Why, God, why?" Cordelia spoke aloud. "Why have you done this to us?"

Cordelia placed the empty jelly glass on the sink and went upstairs to seek solitude. Rarely, if ever, did she go to bed in the daytime, even to rest. But now, ~~that~~ ~~morning~~, she fell on the bed and stared at the ceiling, wondering.

Cordelia did not see Elspeth for four and one-half days. She had glimpses of her, of course, but there were no meals together, no little talks. Once they met in the upstairs corridor but Elspeth turned her head without speaking.

~~But~~ on Friday of that week Elspeth descended the stairway all dressed up. She was wearing a becoming navy

and white dress that complimented her figure, which was becoming slenderer weekly. She was even wearing her pearl earrings and necklace that Cordelia had given her. Lovely, Cordelia said to herself. Elspeth looks lovely.

Cordelia was arranging flowers in the dining room as Elspeth went to the front windows to look out. Cordelia wanted to tell Elspeth she looked lovely. But she dared not. The girl was most likely going to the psychiatrist for another lesson. She usually got herself up a little when she did that.

But this was different. There was a different air about her. Her high nerves appeared coated over with couture. And then it struck. Of course! He was coming. No one else in this world gave Elspeth that air of expectancy.

Once Elspeth told Cordelia that she was not unhappy because she had never expected anything. That was before Robert when expectancy and joy became her everything.

Then Hattie came down the stairs, carrying little Elspeth in one of Cordelia's own baby dresses. It had lace tating around the neck, sleeves and hem. Cordelia's mother had tatted the lace.

"On an outing?" Cordelia called to Hattie.

Hattie frowned at Cordelia.

"Bring the baby, Hattie. She looks so pretty in that dress."

Elspeth went outside and stood on the front veranda.

It was her way of avoiding any semblance of confrontation.

Hattie carried the baby into the dining room.

"What is going on?" Cordelia fairly hissed the question.

"He is coming. Mr. Robert. He coming to see Elsbuth and the baby."

"Is his wife coming?"

"Lawd, don't aksed me. I don't know nothing cepten Elsbuth told me to tote the baby. She dressed the baby all by herself."

For a moment Cordelia took pride in the fact that Elspeth would choose the dress, see its beauty, want it for her child. It just went to show that Elsbeth thought her mother had taste, that she was a person of distinction. She wanted little Elspeth to appear the same. She wanted to show off.

"Is he coming here to the house?"

Hattie said she guessed he was. She didn't know.

Money was all Cordelia could think of. She had to see the man. Elspeth would not ask for anything. And, for sure, he wasn't going to take the baby.

"He's not going to take the baby, is he?"

"Go on now," frowned Hattie. "He aint taking this here baby nowheres."

Cordelia was sorry she had said anything. She did not want Hattie to think there was such a danger. "I meant for a ride or something. Just to get acquainted."

Out of the window Cordelia saw him. He was grinning in the sun as if nothing in this world had gone wrong. He shook hands with Elspeth almost bowing before her, fawning. He appeared shorter somehow. But Cordelia had forgotten he had always been shorter than Elspeth. She didn't see a thing of little Elspeth in the features. Little Elspeth would be tall. Her fingers and toes were long. Robert had soft hands.

A car was parked in the driveway and Cordelia immediately noticed a woman was sitting in it. She was blond but Cordelia couldn't see further. Robert and Elspeth kept standing on the veranda blocking her view. It was more than Cordelia could stand. She went to the door and thrust it open.

"Come in!" she called. "Come in and make yourself at home."

The two, Robert with his dark shiny eyes and Elspeth with her deep luminous ones, stared at her. Then Robert half smiled and came toward her.

"Mrs. Newman. How nice to see you again."

"Yes, well---. Come in. I guess you should come in. Is that your wife out there?"

Robert turned all the way round. "Yes. Yes, it is."

"Tell her to come in, too. She doesn't want to sit out there all day."

"Oh, we're on our way. To Hilton Head. We can't stay long."

Cordelia caught Elspeth's face, puzzled and grieving all at once.

"Yes, we surely would like to meet your wife," said Elspeth.

Robert mumbled something about it's being nice of them and went to the car. Out bounced a very young woman with long straight hair and no make-up. She was wearing khaki shorts and a white T-shirt. Cordelia saw immediately the girl was pretty in her fresh blondness. Her eyes were green and when she smiled she exhibited a charming overbite.

"This is Abigail, Elspeth."

The girl was shorter than Elspeth but had a lovely figure and legs. She could not have been older than twenty-two.

"How do you do?" Elspeth said and attempted a smile.

"This house is all I imagined the South would be," said Abigail. "And the garden! Who is the gardener here?" The voice had breeding in it, ~~And money,~~ Cordelia noted.

"I am," said Cordelia with authority. "The chief gardener."

"Oh, Mrs. Newman. This is Abigail, my wife," said Robert, still smiling and obviously proud of this blond bundle of energy.

The girl took Cordelia's hand and with a slight curtsy and a bright smile, showing her white teeth, warmly greeted Cordelia. The girl was winning and Cordelia could not help but react to the warmth.

"Where are you from, Abigail."

"Boston."

"Then this must be different to you."

"I love it! And you're such a wonderful gardener. Did you plan all that?" She looked out at the rolling lawns and the boxwoods.

"My husband's great grandparents planned the garden. This house has been in our family for a very long time."

"Robie told me."

Robie. Cordelia noted the nickname, which said something she didn't exactly know what.

And then they were in the hall with the girl exclaiming:

"Beautiful! Beautiful! What a charming place. Inside and outside." She turned to Cordelia. "I love the South."

Little Elspeth began to yell. Hattie, still in the dining room, was holding her and patting her back.

"The child has colic," said Cordelia.

Both Robert and Abigail stared at Hattie and the child.

"Poor baby," said Abigail.

Cordelia was feeling dizzy. None of this was happening: not the baby nor its mother and father nor the stranger who had nothing to do with anything. The very awkwardness and the crassness on all parts was such a strain to Cordelia's nerves that she held on to the newel post. She felt faint and bowed her head.

"Are you all right, Mother?" Elspeth asked.

All eyes turned toward her.

Cordelia took out her lace handkerchief and placed it to her nose.

"I've been having these---" She did not finish.

Elsbeth was at her side. "Let's go upstairs. You need rest."

"We have to go anyway," said Robert.

Cordelia took a deep breath. "No," she protested. They had to talk money. If she died she would not let this man out of the house without some arrangements being made.

"Are you all right?" Elsbeth asked again.

"I'm all right." Cordelia lifted her head. The girl Abigail was staring with her mouth open, a pretty mouth.

Robert went to the baby and Hattie. He took the child's fingers, then looked deep into her face. "Mother," he said. "This child looks just like my mother."

Cordelia coughed. "She does not. The baby is a Rutledge. I never saw anything like it. A Rutledge through and through." She turned to Abigail. "Rutledge was my maiden name."

Abigail also went to the baby. "She's so pretty, Robie."

Cordelia stared at them--the father, his daughter and the stepmother. Elsbeth was standing aloof, cast out. Suddenly in contrast to Abigail's shorts and T-shirt Elsbeth looked hot and matronly, old.

"I think we need to have a discussion," said Cordelia.

"Let's go into the library."

Robert appeared to diminish in stature.

"I'll just stay here with the baby," said Abigail.

"Hattie, take Miss Abigail and the baby outside."

"Mother," said Elspeth, "I think you need a rest. Why don't you go upstairs? Robert and I can talk."

Cordelia said she did not need to rest, that she wanted to say a few things and then Elspeth and Robert could talk. In single file they made their way to the library, Robert in the rear.

Cordelia and Elspeth sat while Robert stood before the fireplace as he had done numerous times in this house before. It was a familiar stance, as if he owned the house, was master here.

"Please sit down, Robert." Cordelia indicated the place beside Elspeth on the sofa.

He sat, placing one leg over the other and lifting his head ~~so as~~ to get a better view of Cordelia.

"For beginners," Robert said, "I'm here to do anything I can for this child."

"Yes," said Cordelia. "It's a tragedy."

"Not if we act like sane normal adults," Robert said.

"Elspeth has been seeing a psychiatrist." "Sane" and "normal" brought the ^{fact}~~word~~ to Cordelia's mind.

"I'm sure Robert is not interested in that," Elspeth said.

Robert regarded Elspeth. "How are you feeling?"

"Very well. Thank you."

Cordelia gave a short laugh. "Well, Robert, I think I must commend you for your presence here today. There are men who under these circumstances would just fly away into thin air. It's good of you to show your concern." She was looking into his eyes. Robert had got better looking over the months. He was a happy man. "I think we should talk finances!" She narrowed her eyes.

"Abigail has been absolutely splendid about this whole thing. She didn't mind coming here. And she's perfectly willing to take the baby. We can easily handle that. Abigail loves children."

"Out of the question!" Cordelia spoke before Elspeth had a chance.

"I will bring up my child." Elspeth was looking down at her hands in her lap. She was mumbling.

"But you need support," Cordelia said. "Money."

Robert cocked his head and dampened his lips. "How much are we talking about here?"

"Mother, I really think you should go upstairs and rest. All of this is for Robert and me to discuss."

Cordelia pressed her lips together. "You've been ill, Elspeth. I don't think you're ready to talk finances just now."

Robert sighed. "What a mess."

"Indeed," said Cordelia.

Robert sat up straighter. "Would five hundred a month

be all right? Until the child is of age, of course."

Cordelia asked where the five hundred would be coming from and Robert explained that it depended on how the book went "financially."

"And Pops was pretty much of a squirrel."

Cordelia stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"^{my father} ~~He~~ saved every dime he ever made practically. He was very generous in his will to us boys."

Cordelia felt a warming inside. The money was there. That was all she wanted to know. "I think five hundred might be all right," she said. "But I want this child educated. College."

Robert slapped his leg and stood. "We'll take care of that when the time comes." He turned to Cordelia. "So, it's all settled. Right?"

Neither Cordelia nor Elspeth said anything.

Robert appeared to examine each, Cordelia and then Elspeth. "Then I guess we'd better be on our way."

Cordelia looked at Elspeth. She was still staring at her hands. "Don't you want to talk to Elspeth?"

"I would love to, but we've got another five or so hours ahead of us. Abigail wants to get to the beach before dark."

Elspeth stood and Robert took both of her hands in his. "Now you take care of yourself, Els." He was smiling tenderly, looking into her pleading eyes.

Cordelia watched all this with mixed regard. She was

happy to have the man out of their lives and for his money to enter into them. But Elspeth's expression, so brave, sweetly smiling, was wrenching and Cordelia was having difficulty swallowing. Tears were not far from her eyes.

"And your writing? Are you still with it?"

Elspeth nodded.

"The book clubs have my galleys now---so---pray!"

Elspeth said that she would pray.

He dropped her hands. His other world, the world of youth and shiny hair, was waiting for him. This, the slow drawling South, was behind him. Sun and water and lightness awaited.

When they went outside Abigail in a lawn chair was holding the baby. She appeared too fragile for the baby.

"Look at that!" Robert exclaimed as if to say Madonna and the Child. But he added nothing. The pretty scene was to explain all.

And they drove off as quickly as a year^{is} gone. They would never come again.

"My, my," was all Cordelia said.