

CHAPTER TWO

They danced and talked all night. Thea, in her flush of excitement, felt that the very walls of the ballroom and all the people within had vanished and there was only the two of them, excited, finding each other, face to face examining eyes, expressions, a blending of their sense: humor, curiosity, want.

They talked and Thea discovered that Oliver's middle brother, Cuthbert, was working as a journalist in Shanghai, where Thea's sister, Martha, and her husband, Gunnar, lived. Gunnar was a professor of chemistry and a noted author of scientific books, though known mainly in Norway. Thea told him all this, eager, amazed that they had such parallel lives.

"Just think," she said. "They are probably meeting now, this minute, your brother and my sister, and they will know we are meeting, too."

Oliver took her hand and pressed it. Thea felt the blush throughout her body and

later she danced with the knowledge that in all the room the two of them were unlike anyone else with their exotic brother and sister living lives no one in the room could possibly guess. They had this between them, the bond of China and Norway and their closeness in it.

He told her he would see her again. He kissed her on the cheek. "Again and again and again."

Thea laughed like a school girl. The night was so black. In Norway there was no darkness at night now. Here there was pure blackness. But not of mood. The lights whirled above her head as she danced, Oliver's strong arms holding her, at last, tightly. The light in her was an invisible wonder.

She left the dance with her "date" for the evening and was surprised as he sulked all the way back to the Houghton's house. She had ignored him, of course. She realized that now, but at the time nothing seemed to matter.

"Oliver Whitfield is too old for you," he said as they neared the house, bumping over the red-clay road, he steering with obvious anger.

"I'm so sorry," Thea said.

"That he's too old?" The young man looked and spoke like a deprived boy-child.

"That you didn't enjoy the evening."

"Well, you certainly did. I suppose that's all that matters in your world."

Thea said nothing and they drove the distance to the house in silence. The young man did not even see her to the door. And she listened as the car made its way down the driveway. Thea looked after it and sighed — mostly with relief that he was

gone.

Now she had time to think only of Oliver Whitfield. She put both hands to her cheeks. How happy she was! How gloriously happy.

But the days went by, then weeks. She heard nothing from him. There was only his name on the masthead of the newspaper shouting at her each afternoon. She expected flowers, phone calls, notes. There was only this flatness. Finally she asked Lucille, "Where do you think he is?" It was a desperate act, she knew. Lucille was such a gossip. But she had to say something, tell somebody. "I don't understand," she added.

"I watched you two dancing. He's crazy about you." Lucille was examining her face, trying to find something there. Tears? Thea looked away.

"There's the girl in Charleston," mumbled Lucille. "But that's supposed to be in the past."

Lucille was saying out loud what Thea had been thinking. Thea felt the hollowness at the pit of her stomach. She saw an invisible face before her, prettier than she, Southern, smart, fashionably dressed, fascinating. She saw them together in a large house by the sea and the pretty girl was smiling a teasing smile, a smile only given to lovers. She, Thea, was forgotten, foreign. The girl in Charleston was soil of his own, known and immediate.

"I'll tell you what," said Lucille. She was always saying that: "I'll tell you what."

"What?" said Thea, her shoulders relaxing. They were in Lucille's room with the

long windows and white curtains and tester bed.

"I'll find out," said Lucille. "Ann Ravenel knows everybody in Charleston. And she knows everything."

Thea sat up in her chair. "No."

"Why?"

"He'll find out." She reached out for Lucille's arm in protest.

Lucille smiled a knowing smile, her lips pressed together. "He'll never know."

Lucille did have her gift of wile. In school she was always tricking the headmistress with her feminine southern ways. She could do no wrong in the eyes of her superiors.

"I'm going to see Ann at the tennis court," Lucille was saying. "I'll find out. You're sure you don't want to come?"

Thea shook her head. She said she had to write a letter home. Which was true. She had planned to tell of the dance, mentioning Oliver's brother who was in Shanghai. She would ask her mother to write her sister Martha. Perhaps Martha would invite him for dinner. And in that way she would become closer to the Whitfield family, at least.

"You're probably right," Lucille said. "Everybody was watching you two at the club, and I'm sure Ann was watching, too. She might get suspicious if you started asking all sorts of questions and it would get back to him."

It was so childlike, Thea was thinking. Girls in Scandinavia grew up faster than their American counterparts. The silly schemes and playfulness exhibited here were put away by the age of sixteen in Norway. Thereafter, life took on its basic seriousness.

Thea watched as Lucille left swinging her tennis racket. Later she started the letter to her mother, mentioning Oliver and Shanghai. There was still hope and by the time the letter arrived in Kristiania surely she would have heard something from Oliver. She calculated it took a month and a half for a letter to go to and fro. By then something surely would have taken place. "One way or another," she muttered.

Writing the lengthy letter gave her some comfort. It was as if she were at home and in another world, where she knew nothing of a man named Oliver Whitfield. She wondered if she were actually in her house in Kristiania now, would he then loom so large in her life? Surely there were men in Kristiania more attractive, more intelligent and just as traveled. What was there then that caught her attention?

The depth in his face was what she first saw. There was a mystery in him, the mystery of a thinker and writer. His challenges seemed far greater than men she knew in Norway. Indeed, the very sameness of her native land seemed almost tiresome. Certainly the ethnic makeup. She could see that now from so great a distance. It was the geographical nature of Norway that challenged the blandness, the land, water and mountains, all different in their grandeur.

Here the land caused no friction. It lay peacefully but the people were as different as the mountains and valleys of Norway. Oliver Whitfield, soft spoken as he was, was a contradiction in himself. He was courteous and yet his beliefs, expressed through his editorials, were as determined as a wild boar. He was completely man, in his thinking, and even in the way he looked at a woman.

It was the latter that brought a slight dizziness to her now, remembering his

small grey eyes and the way he looked at her as they danced. None of it was a lie. It was true, their mutual attraction. But where was he? She could never have been that wrong about a person, especially this person.

She folded the letter she wrote her mother and stared at the envelope. Above all she was a practical person, she reasoned. And this meeting, this attraction was merely facile. It was not as if they were engaged to be married or anything approaching it. She was merely drawn to him, albeit more than she had ever been before. She patted the envelope. Forget him, she said to herself. And as if she had willed it, she went out into the garden to join Mrs. Houghton who showed her about the garden that bloomed so richly in the red soil throughout the green rolling lawns.

"She's pregnant," said Lucille, fairly bending over with the news.

Thea sat up in her bed. Mrs. Houghton had suggested she take a nap, part of the routine of the household here. Thea despised the habit. For one thing she was never able to sleep and she did not want to lie there and think of Oliver Whitfield's mouth and eyes or anything about him.

Thea first noticed Lucille's tennis racket, which she dropped onto the antique chair in Thea's bedroom.

"Who?" said Thea adjusting herself to the energy of Lucille.

"The girl in Charleston. Ann knows all about it. Everybody in Charleston knows. Everybody in South Carolina knows. You don't want to have anything to do with him," pronounced Lucille breathlessly, adding that the talk was he had broken their

engagement when he heard she was pregnant. "He hasn't laid eyes on her for months. He's been away!"

Thea felt the blood drain from her face and there was a small pain about her heart. "How was tennis?"

Lucille stared at her. "It's a scandal, Thea!"

Thea casually picked up the racket and sat in the rocking chair. She regarded the racket and then began to swing it to and fro. "Will he marry her?" she asked and heard her voice, quiet, calm.

"No. He abandoned her, refuses to talk to her, sends back her letters. I mean, that's what everybody says."

Thea suddenly stood. "The tea!" she said. "We're late. Hurry."

Lucille looked at her watch. "We've plenty of time. But I guess we should dress." She took hold of the door knob, then turned again. "Don't say anything. I mean, I wouldn't. Pretend you're not the least interested in anything Oliver Whitfield does."

"Which is the truth," lied Thea. She watched Lucille as she went out the door. Her breath came in small jerks, then the pain changed to anger. How could she have possibly thought twice about such a man? How could she have been so stupid? She wanted to leave this place. She would write her parents. She was coming home. She hated this place, the cloying, the phony aristocracy, the heat, the terrible heat. She was not meant for this. She was meant for northern winds, northern flora, birds, air, snow, bells and fur. The thought of the ladies tea party ahead sickened her further, the drawling girlishness, all dressed up for each other.

She spied the letter she had written home. Tomorrow she would write she wanted to return home. Her father would make arrangements for her passage to London and then to the North Sea. The very thought of it thrilled her, the wind in her hair. Home. The word quieted her heart.

Sunday. Church. In all the weeks she had been visiting the Houghtons they never missed church. The plans were elaborate. Everyone dressed in their finest to worship their God. By midmorning before the service began, they entered two parked cars, the women of the house in one car and the Senator, alone, in the second car. And in this fashion, driven by Negro men, they made their way to worship.

All of it was new to Thea. Church was new to her except at Christmas Eve. Only old people in Norway attended weekly church services. The young were too busy with their lives. But, and she marked it well, she knew the people in Norway were honest, probably more believing than these praying Southerners. In Norway there was no crime to speak of, no thieves, no fear.

The long sessions at the Episcopal church in Ashton tired Thea, but she sat between Mrs. Houghton and Lucille and let her thoughts wander. This Sunday was different. She was thinking of Halvor, a handsome young man who had written to her in London, vowing his everlasting love. Halvor was three years older than she and had won the ski competition the year before when all the Scandinavian countries competed. She stood at the foot of Holmenkollen and watched as his slender figure rose in the air like a bird. Afterward he was breathless and excited and his fair good looks were like

Norway itself.

Thea was thinking that when she returned she would resume her romance with Halvor. Halvor, the Fair, she called him. But, in truth, she had no such feelings for him. They were children together. Their love was innocent and childlike. She answered his letter in London but she did not speak of love. In her mind he seemed only a boy. He was now studying in Sweden. Perhaps he had changed. Perhaps she had changed. Of the latter she was certain.

Then Lucille poked her in the ribs with her elbow. Thea turned to Lucille and Lucille lowered her dark-lashed eyes, then without looking up indicated with her hand the right side of the aisle. Five pews down from them was Oliver Whitfield. Thea glanced at Lucille. "The nerve," she whispered. She was seething. What did he think he was doing praying in a church!

Well, he ought to pray, she said to herself. She thought of the poor girl in Charleston, carrying his baby in disgrace. And he without mercy for it. He was wearing a grey seersucker suit that Southern men were pleased to wear in this hot climate. His face was tanned and Thea, even in her anger, was thinking how well he looked as he studiously listened to the ageing rector who was delivering an endless sermon on the Trinity. He was not a truly ugly man.

Next to him in the pew sat an older woman whose gray hair was waved becomingly about her face. She sat with her head uplifted and Thea noted her features, an aquiline nose, firm chin, high forehead. It must be his mother, Thea thought, sitting so haughtily, announcing to the congregation: I am proud of my son, he has done no

wrong, we belong in this church. We are WHITFIELDS.

Lucille began to giggle silently, putting her hand to her mouth to stifle any sound. Thea punched her and Lucille straightened as if listening to the rector again. But Thea could not dismiss the pain of rejection that seemed to want to close her throat. Never had she been so humiliated. She had openly flirted with the man, told him in so many words how attracted to him she was and he had all but laughed at her. She watched as he knelt to pray after the rector ended his sermon.

How could she have been so stupid, she thought, watching his profile as he followed the words in the Prayer Book.

"Let's go," Thea said as soon as the last Amen was said by the young vicar. In no way did she wish to see Oliver Whitfield or meet his mother or, for that matter, meet anyone. She and Lucille hurried to the waiting car watching while Senator and Mrs. Houghton mingled to speak to other parishioners.

"That's his mother," Lucille said.

Thea watched as Mrs. Houghton gave Mrs. Whitfield a little kiss on the cheek. Mrs. Houghton was indeed a kind woman. Obviously she knew what the woman must be suffering on her son's behalf and any kindness was not to be avoided. Nowhere did she see Oliver. He disappeared in the crowd like a vanished presence.

After midday dinner Mrs. Houghton announced that it was nap time. Lucille, accustomed to the rite, immediately began to climb the winding staircase. But Thea, announcing she would be up soon, went out onto the front veranda. The large meals

the Houghtons served added to her melancholy and the garden outside pulled her to it as if its beauty would lift the heaviness within her. Last night's flashing rain had left the day sparkling fresh, not a cloud in the sky and the garden fairly shimmered in the sun. She sat in one of the rockers and began watching a hummingbird as it flitted from one petunia to another. She delighted in the color, grey and orange and yellow, and ever so nervous. It was the second such bird she had seen here. After the hummingbird, there came a bumblebee and she watched its slow movement from flower to flower so long she became drowsy and let her head rest on the back of the tall rocker.

She awoke to find Oliver Whitfield smiling down at her. He was wearing the same seersucker suit he had worn in church and the tan on his face was more notable in the white day. She was startled, then with a will rose from the chair.

"Don't go," she heard him say. "Thea. Don't go."

She stared at him with narrowed eyes. He's crazy, she thought. Mad.

"You've heard." He stared straight at her, his long thinness casting a shadow on the brick floor of the porch.

Thea said nothing.

"It's not true," he said, not turning his gaze or blinking the small grey eyes.

Thea searched his face for a lie. His expression did not change. It was as if he were daring her with his seriousness.

"Can I tell you about it?" His voice was hoarse and he looked down at his feet, then at a shining car parked halfway down the drive.

Thea looked at the car. "What?" she asked.

"I know a place," he said. "I want to explain something, everything. I wrote you."

"I never got it."

"I tore it up."

Thea glanced at the car once more. Did she dare go with him? What would the Houghton's say? What would everybody say? People would see them. They would think she was as wild as the girl in Charleston.

"You are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen." He was suddenly smiling.

And something like the opening of a flower softened in her. "All right," she said. "For a little while."

It was as if all reason had left her. She wanted to laugh into the windless day. The recklessness was exhilarating. As she walked beside him, she noticed that his height was as tall as her father's. She looked up at him and he looked down at her and they both laughed.

"I parked here," he said, opening the heavy car door for her. "Everybody takes naps around here. I didn't want the noise to distract the Houghton's slumber."

"Why do they do that? Take naps. They all do. Even the Senator."

"I could answer that, but I won't."

Thea sensed disdain in his voice, which surprised her. He appeared so at home in the Houghton household, as if the place were as familiar as his own.

She watched as he wound the starter in front of the car, then jumped in beside her. His legs seemed almost too long for the vehicle.

"Where have you been?" she asked quietly as they drove bumpily out of the

cedar and crape myrtle driveway.

“Charleston.”

Thea glanced at him noting his lips pressed into one thin line. He had a nice profile, similar to his mother’s. He had inherited her looks, though the facile lines were perhaps suited to a woman’s face softened, as the lines were, by women’s hairstyling. She regarded his dark hair in the sun, the high forehead, the nose which surely had been broken once and then, surprisingly, she saw one gray hair at his temple. Eleven years, she was thinking. There were eleven years between them.

“All this time? Have you been in Charleston all this time? I thought you had probably gone back to China.”

He only nodded.

They found a place by a waterfall. The oaks and scrub pines were dense. Weeping willows outlined the top of the fall like melancholy ghosts. The water fell over polished stones. The coolness lifted Thea. She was thinking of the waterfalls in Norway, in the fjord country, the enormous weight of the water there. But this was so small, intimate, even sad as if its creation had been made for lost longings. Perhaps an Indian’s longing. Years and years ago.

“It’s so beautiful,” she said.

They sat on the bank of the water, where wild ferns grew and water lilies bloomed like happy children.

“I come here often,” Oliver said, narrowing his eyes as he regarded the water falling from the hillock above.

"Do you come alone?"

"Now. I do. We swam here as boys."

Thea looked at him. A beam of sunlight crossed his face and vanished. "I can't imagine you as a boy." The greenery of the woods reflected in his eyes.

He cocked his head and glanced at her. "Why?"

"I don't know. You just seem as if you've always been so."

"I love your accent. Say that again."

Thea felt the blush come to her face. "What?"

"So. Say that again."

"So." She heard the pronounced W as she gave the word.

He laughed, then stretched out his arms. "I'm free," he said. "Free."

The statement was alarming and Thea sat straighter. Yet she was feeling his energy. It translated to her own body. The man was electric with life. His words seemed to free her. "Tell me. Tell me about the girl in Charleston. Everyone here knows, you know."

Her relief was extreme. She wanted to hear everything from him. Not some silly girls.

"Do we have to ruin this?" He picked up a small twig and broke it. Then throwing the broken parts into the water he looked straight ahead. "All right," he said simply.

He told her then about his engagement to Beverly. That was her name: Beverly Majick, "the renowned Majicks of Charleston." He met the girl through a friend of his at William and Mary. He thought he was in love but when he returned from China the

feeling disappeared. "That's exactly what I told her." And she told him she was pregnant.

"I was willing to go through with it at first."

"A wedding?" Thea stared at his face as he talked, the golden sun shining through the thick leaves all the while making his story seem almost dream-like. He spoke in a monotone as if Thea were not even present.

He nodded. "But I found out she was three months pregnant and that was impossible. I'd only been back a few days when I went to see her." He lowered his head. "Then I met you, went back to Charleston again. Her family was adamant I marry her. I refused."

He threw a stone into the water and they both watched sadly until the circles disappeared. He looked at Thea. "And that's what happened."

Fingers of fear were gathering in Thea's body. He could have made a girl pregnant. Such spent passion was alien to everything Thea had been brought up to know. Still, men could be excused, she guessed. Nevertheless, it was a scandal. Her alienated life had never been touched even by a shadow of wrongdoing. But as she listened to him she was analyzing her own part of the drama. She was sensing a foreign pleasure in the fact that she could have been a factor in the breaking of an engagement. The pleasure, she reckoned, was a small pleasure coupled with an unfamiliar fear.

They sat in silence listening to the water fall and the odd sounds coming from the thickness of the forest. Thea searched her mind for reasoning. There was no doubt

about her feelings for this man. Yet there was the unknown: his knowledge of the world and women. She felt a competitiveness that also brought anger and jealousy and again the fear as well.

"There's somebody else now. She's going to marry him." He tossed his arms in the air. "Hooray!" He shouted and there came back an echo, his own voice, quieter, returning to them.

"You see," he said pointing. "Someone over there agrees." He smiled at Thea. "Don't you?"

Thea said nothing. She was remembering just last summer at a gathering where she sat between her parents. She wore a blue dress and Halvor asked if she would dance with him. It was timid, innocent and lovely. The life here was so in variance — wild, untamed with their passions about politics, alliances and vendettas.

"I've shocked you, haven't I?" Oliver asked softly.

Thea sat straighter. "Not really." She did not want him to see in her any sign of the lessening of herself. She felt inferior to the whole world, especially the girl in Charleston whose face she only dreamed.

"Will you see me again?"

Thea did not look at him. "We are very unlike," she said. "I don't know. I am not like your friends."

"And that's probably why I like you so much."

Thea looked at him and smiled. The pleasure of his words were nice.