

CHAPTER THREE

Later than night Lucille teased Thea about “sneaking off” with a “near-married” man. “I saw you two in the car.”

Holding back her anger Thea countered that she was in no way “sneaking off” with anyone. “That’s all finished with him,” she said. “The girl in Charleston is marrying someone else.”

“He told you that?” Lucille’s dark eyes were fairly gleaming.

They were seated in the upstairs sewing room and Thea was tating lace, an endeavor that fascinated the entire Houghton household and especially the servants.

Thea nodded.

“Well,” said Lucille by way of announcement, “that leaves the path clear, doesn’t it?”

Thea asked what she meant by that, a clear path.

Lucille jerked her shoulders. "You know. He's all yours, if you want somebody like that."

It was the first time Thea had ever noticed a hint of meanness in Lucille. But there it was. For all her sweet southernness, underneath lay clouds of competitiveness. She had seen this in other young women she had met here. Anything good that happened to someone other than themselves brought out this venom.

Thea rose from her chair and placed the tatting and ball of white thread on her dressing table. She sat before the mirror and began brushing her hair. It hung long and thick to her back. She could see Lucille in the mirror. Her mouth was turned down unattractively as she picked at her fingernail on her right thumb. Strange, how the girl's looks changed. Most of the time she was pretty, especially at parties, where she sparkled and smiled. But, as now, there were times she could even be called ugly. Thea was thinking Lucille would grow to be an ugly woman with a sour expression. She imagined her skin hardened, her eyes dulled and her black hair an iron grey. Bitter.

But perhaps she had misunderstood her, Thea thought. She did have her right to her opinions. And if she didn't like Oliver Whitfield, or approve of him, that was all right, too. It had nothing to do with Thea per se. She told herself that and put down her brush.

"Do they do that in Norway?" Lucille asked and obviously noting Thea's surprise turned her gaze to the floor of the room.

"Do what?" Thea tried to smile.

Lucille did not look up. "Know a man before you're married." She was mumbling.

So that was it, Thea thought. Lucille was comparing her to the girl in

Charleston, perhaps thinking that premature sex was condoned in foreign Norway and if so then why was she, Lucille, having such a person visiting her in the goodness of the saintly Houghton family.

Hot tears filled Thea's eyes. She had never been so angry. If the brush were still in her hand, she believed she would have thrown it at the girl.

Lucille, without once glancing at Thea, rose abruptly from her chair and leaving the room slammed the door behind her.

Thea collapsed on the dressing table stool. Her body was trembling with rage and even her vision was blurred. Her trunks, she thought. She would pack tonight, leave this place, telegraph her parents. She rose and went to the door. The Houghtons were still downstairs. She would have to ask Mrs. Houghton to have her luggage brought down from the storage rooms. But just as she took hold of the door knob she thought of Oliver. She would be leaving him, too. Probably forever. Now that he owned his own newspaper, it was unlikely he would be doing much foreign traveling. He told her on the way back to the house yesterday afternoon that it would take years, perhaps five or more, for it to show a profit, even though there was no competition further away than Atlanta. He had bought the two competing weekly papers in Ashton and combined them as one daily. He did own land that his father left him. But he didn't want to sell that just now.

Still, she could not stay here. Lucille's words came back to her. The girl knew nothing of Norway. England, she thought, should have broadened her outlook on such things. Of course, there was premarital sex in Norway. Engaged couples sometimes

spent months together before marriage. But these were mostly shop girls. None of her own friends would ^{ever} even do such a thing. Nor would she.

She let go of the doorknob and sat before the mirror again. She wanted to examine her face, find answers. It was more than a girlhood spat she and Lucille had exchanged. Lucille was assaulting not only her, Thea, but her whole country, even her family, all the while thinking how inferior Thea was. Why else would she make such a remark? She watched as two large tears ran down her reddened cheeks.

She placed both hands to her neck. Why was all this happening to her? Why was Oliver Whitfield anything in her life? Why was she here at all? She would never fit here. If she married Oliver, would she live here the rest of her life[?] She stood abruptly. "Impossible," she said aloud. She could never live here, be buried here. She had seen the cemetery with its angels and archangels and saccharine quotations. It stood for everything she loathed in life.

She sat on her bed. No, she said to herself, she would not see Oliver Whitfield again. Tomorrow she would make plans for her departure. She thought of Halvor studying away in Sweden. He was more her type and the seasons of Scandinavia were her very soul. She undressed but sleep would not come. Lucille. Oliver. Their faces haunted her.

The next morning Thea did not go down for breakfast. Usually she sat with Mrs. Houghton outside on the terrace. Most often they were alone. The Senator left early for his office in town and Lucille was a late sleeper. Now, though, Thea lay in her bed

planning just what she would say to Mrs. Houghton when a knock on the door startled her.

It was Lucille, she thought, coming to apologize. Thea quickly rose from the bed and went to the door. It was Annie, the young daughter of the cook Elsbeth. The girl's black pigtails stood straight out on each side and her young pretty face fairly shown.

"Miz Houghton say you come on." The girl spoke so rapidly Thea could not understand her.

Finally she understood and thanked Annie. Without pause she determinedly began to dress. She was half-disappointed it had not been Lucille. She slipped a white blouse over her head. "As soon as possible," she muttered. "I'll get this over as soon as possible," though she dreaded telling Mrs. Houghton about the events of yesterday and last night. Possibly Lucille had already told her.

When she was half down the stairs, she heard voices and one glimpse toward the terrace told her what was happening. Oliver was sitting at the table with Mrs. Houghton. Both were sipping coffee. Thea's heart skipped and she put her hand to her breast. Slowly she made her way to the terrace, her face fairly burning.

Oliver rose as Thea entered the shaded terrace. She had not braided her hair. He was half smiling, a crooked smile which, she had discovered yesterday afternoon, was a way with him.

"Good morning," said Thea, forcing a brightness in her voice. "Have you come to get news for the newspaper, Oliver?"

Mrs. Houghton touched her lips with the wide damask napkin. "Oliver wants to show you the paper. Isn't that lovely? You've never seen a newspaper in operation, I wager."

Thea shook her head and sat down at her regular place, a view that looked out onto the gardens. There was no way to hide the color she knew was blushing her face. Yet her sense of dignity did not leave her. That was the one quality her mother always complimented her on, her poise, calm. She did not know she appeared this way, but since it was deemed an asset she was determined to develop the bearing. Inside, she was just the opposite. But since by nature she was not given to much talk or show of emotions perhaps these very qualities helped in their way.

Annie served her a delicious looking melon. The fruits here were so many and varied. Most mornings now they had figs from the garden and various colored berries grown on the grounds. But this morning she wanted nothing. Food was the last thing in her thoughts. Oliver's grey eyes gazing at her hair were making her nervous. She looked at him. "Aren't you having any?"

He said he had already had breakfast. Thea glanced at Mrs. Houghton. Her pleasant demeanor told her immediately she knew nothing of last night and Lucille's behavior. Rather, she seemed especially pleased to see Oliver here on her terrace. "Wouldn't you like to see the newspaper, too, Mrs. Houghton?" Thea asked.

"Yes, I would, but some other time. There's so much to do here. We're having ten for dinner tonight." She looked at Oliver as if he had just arrived. "Can't you join us?"

"Delighted," he said, not looking at the woman but all the while watching Thea as she lifted a piece of the green melon to her mouth. He was actually staring. Each time she saw Oliver he looked more handsome. His teeth were very white against his tanned face, and for the first time she noted his hands, long slender fingers with bowed thumbs, clumsy thumbs but the rest of his hands were nice. They were interesting hands. They were not the blunt fingers of a yeoman or a laborer. But they weren't the hands of a dandy either.

As they left the terrace Thea glanced up at Lucille's room. The dark green shutters were open but there was no one at the window. She wondered if the sound of their talk had not awakened her. Oliver took her hand and the two strolled to the waiting automobile. The touch of his hand caused the same sensation she had felt before with him — like a flower opening. A sweetness filled her senses and she smiled up at him.

"I wish you could see your hair," he said.

Thea looked up at the sky and ran her left hand down the back of her hair. "I used to wear it like this all the time. I hurried so."

"It's so beautiful — like the color of wheat."

"Everyone in Norway looks like this. We all have the same hair except the darker ones — probably the Vikings and their visit to the Moors."

He said nothing but tightened his hold on her hand. When they reached the car he gently placed his hands on her shoulders. "I'm in love with you, goddess."

Thea was so taken aback she actually gasped, but his mouth was on hers and she knew instantly that all talk of leaving was buried. She pulled away from him.

"They're watching," she said.

"Who cares," he said and kissed her again.

Thea pushed against him. "They are. They'll think me wanton."

Oliver threw back his head and laughed. "No one — no one I know would say that word except you."

He placed an arm about her waist and opened the car door with the other.

"Wanton," he repeated.

He was laughing at her. Nonetheless Thea traced her mouth with her fingers. She had never been kissed like that before. Did he really like her? Or was he treating her like the girl in Charleston? He said he loved her. Was he teasing again? She had returned the kiss. She had never been kissed in the daylight before and now she could see every line of his face, sobered with the two lines between his brows more emphasized than ever.

"I fell in love with you the first minute I saw you," he whispered and he smoothed her hair from her face.

Thea smiled at him. "You don't even know me."

"It can happen. It did."

"You don't know me. You don't even know my parents. My sister. You've never seen my house."

He said nothing. He was regarding her as if she were a child. "I don't have to see your parents or your sister or anything. I---" Suddenly he turned to the wheel of the car.

Thea had not realized the motor was still running so surprised had she been by his actions.

They drove in silence. Thea watched as he narrowed his eyes. Here was the man who wrote of the world and heads-of-state and he loved her, Thea Kristin Aaker. How could this be? They drove to a log house in a wooded vale near the town of Ashton. He stopped the car.

"This isn't the newspaper." She looked at him abruptly.

"Practically," he said. "This is where I write."

Thea stared at the rather expansive house built of logs. It was similar to the huts many families had in the mountains of Norway. But this one was larger.

He opened the car door. "Shall we?" he said.

Inside was a surprisingly large room with small windows. Every wall was filled top to bottom with books. A globe stood on a mahogany stand and nearby was an expansive desk with a typewriter and gooseneck lamp. Thea noted the fireplace stacked now with neatly placed logs. Facing the fireplace were a sofa and two comfortable chairs. A glass holding a half-finished drink rested on the floor beside one of the chairs, which told Thea he was not always alone here in this cozy hideaway.

But what startled Thea the most were the rugs.

"They are Norse!" she said, examining with her toe the intricately woven grey and cream rugs. On the other side of the room was a red and white one, the red being that of old Norway, almost Chinese or Indian. "Where?" she asked, her mouth open in wonder.

"In Norway."

"You?"

He nodded. "I thought you would like them. That's why I brought you here."

"Oh, Oliver." She wanted to go to him, hug him. "You did like it there, didn't you?" What odd things, she was thinking, make up love. For she truly believed, this moment, she loved Oliver Whitfield. She felt at home here, relaxed. She examined all the books, thousands of them, everywhere. Books also had been her salvation. During the dark months in Norway she read constantly, English books as well as Scandinavian. She walked over to the globe and spun it with her hand. "There," she said. "Norway."

Oliver was smiling in his pride. He said he was happy she liked his house.

"Do you live here? All the time?"

"All the time."

He opened another door to a kitchen. Inside was a black girl, finishing dishes.

"Velvet," he said. "This is Miss Aaker. She has come all the way from Norway?"

"Is?" Velvet said and grinned.

"Sure is," said Oliver.

He opened another door. "And this is my bedroom."

Thea examined the spare room, noted the slender bed, bureau and one chair. It was a room for one only.

"Not much to look at," Oliver said.

"It's not your best room," said Thea, half laughing. She pictured tall Oliver lying

in the narrow bed.

He asked her if she wanted coffee and she nodded, though she really wanted nothing. He asked Velvet if she had coffee left over.

"We got some." She answered.

Oliver indicated one of the chairs and Thea sat, smiling to herself and regarding the rugs. "These are very old. How did you come by them?"

"A lady. She wanted to sell them."

The red rug was almost like one in her house in Kristiania. It was as if he had taken it from her own rooms and placed it here. She could not take her eyes from it.

Oliver sat across from her. "One day I'm going to build a house here. A very large house with horses and animals and enough land to hunt."

"And books," Thea added.

Oliver leaned back. "All of it — is like chasing after the wind. Isn't it?"

"Eh?"

"Dreams. Vanity."

Velvet placed a cup of coffee on the table beside her.

Thea took up the cup. "It isn't vanity to dream," Thea said.

"Yes." Oliver leaned back in the chair. "How does it go?" He was silent for a while. "Yes," he said. "I, the Teacher, when King over Israel in Jerusalem, applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind."

Thea said nothing. She did not know what he was saying. The words in English were not familiar.

"Ecclesiastes," he said. "The wisest book in the Bible. Some say."

"And that is an evil," Thea said. "Dreams?"

Oliver sipped his coffee. "Absolutely. I think of my father and grandfather, before them — how they worked on this earth, daily, leaving all to me and my brothers. We did nothing to receive these gifts."

Thea studied his face. There was a melancholy she had seen only once, the first time she had ever glimpsed him, when the guests at the Houghton house were laughing at the naivete of the frightened Negro man. The look of him now matched her own feelings and she understood.

"But your work," she said. "You work hard. And you will leave everything to your children when you have them. Is that such a sin? Is it vanity?"

"My children will work for what they receive."

Thea said what she was thinking. "You will be very hard on your children, then."

"Our children," Oliver said as casually as he had quoted from Ecclesiastes.

Thea instinctively put both hands to her face. She felt the heat rise to her neck and finally to her face and arms.

He came and sat on the arm of the chair. "I'm asking you to marry me, Thea Aaker. You belong here, you belong in this cabin. You belong in the house we will build together."

Thea looked up at him and he bent and kissed her forehead.