

## CHAPTER FOUR

Before leaving the cabin Oliver asked once more:

"When will we marry?"

The familiar confusion seized Thea, confusion and the acceleration of her heart. "It's too soon." She looked up into his face, sobered now, almost stern. Who are you? She wanted to ask, observing the strong features — the mouth so determined now.

"Not soon enough," he mumbled.

Thea sighed heavily. There was a world outside this book-lined room. She knew that, but a blessed strengthlessness had taken her and she tilted her head for his kiss. She wanted to return what he had given. Her reasoning was madness, she knew. But his hands sunk into her hair and the gentleness of the gesture softened her further.

"I know you, better than I've known anyone, frightened as you are."

She drew away. "Frightened?" How did he know such a thing?

He took hold of her shoulders. "When?" Set a date. "We can be married by the end of the week."

She drew her hands down the sides of her hair. "Everything is so — " She scarcely could breathe.

"Do you love me? Tell me, tell me the truth."

The word came naturally. "Yes."

He kissed her again, mouth open to her own, and there was darkness all about save when she opened her eyes and saw his lean face and the depth of his feelings in the marked lines of his face.

When she was alone at home again her senses half returned. Had she promised anything? No. Only that she loved Oliver Whitfield. And the truth of it was there. She smiled to herself and hugged one of the small lace pillows on her bed. Yes! She wanted to spend the rest of her days with this man whose emotions so matched her own. Objectively she admired him, too, for his intellect, curiosity, his charming log house, the craggy look of him, his searching mouth on hers. Protective.

She purposely had tried to slip into the Houghton's house without being seen. She had to be alone. She had to think about this momentous change in her life. For that was what she was feeling. Her life was changed and she was in a place she had never known before, the dark world of love. For love was darkness. It wasn't light and sun and water, as she thought it would be. That, she knew now, was for the frivolous. But this, it was an unknown darkness and she had given in to it, and declared her love

in truth. She could never hurt Oliver Whitfield, not a single lash of his eye. She would do anything for him, go anywhere. Her body was so filled with the sweetness of living she did not hear the knock on the door.

Annie, the maid, opened the door.

"Oh, Annie!"

"It's a letter. It's for yew." She giggled. "Come all the way from over yonder."

Thea immediately saw her mother Astrid's handwriting and she was instantly in the sane world again, the daughter of the house. She pictured her mother at her writing desk, a rose placed just so, writing her faraway daughter. Never would she have guessed, her innocent mother, what had befallen this daughter. In all the world she would never have approved of Thea's actions, going to a man's house, declaring love after his impassioned kisses, returning those kisses. Her mother was picturing her still a child, innocent of the adult world and all its worries and sorrows. But, seeing the envelope now, Thea felt no guilt, only gladness. She opened the letter carefully and in Norwegian read:

June 24, 1920

*Thea dearest,*

*Such goings on here recently. First, there is talk of renaming Kristiania. They, the Parliament, <sup>W.D.P.T.</sup> ~~what~~ to take on the old name of Oslo. Isn't that a change? Some are for it, others against. I and your father rather approve of the change. Perhaps when you return you can write your American friends from a city called Oslo. In time. Perhaps.*

*Now: Here is the real news. Your father has business in America. And I am thinking of visiting my first cousin who lives in Minnesota.*

*You remember the Reverend Nils Anderson? Or were you too young? He is from here but left after becoming bishop. He is there in Minnesota helping to bring growth to the American-Lutheran churches there. The Americans keep him very busy, but his wife, my cousin, dear Lena, is homesick in her loneliness, I think. So it will be nice for her to have company and I will enjoy seeing America again. By then your visit with the lovely Houghton family will be concluded and you will come to Minnesota. We three can journey back to Norway together. Very pleasant. Don't you think? Or have you become so in love with America you do not wish to return to small Norway? I doubt that very much.*

*We so enjoyed your last letter to us. I have written to Shanghai to have Martha invite your friend's brother for a visit.*

*More later as I must help Ulla prepare for a dinner with friends from Sweden this very night. We are always so busy. I think the mountains will call for us in a fortnight.*

*Love to my dearest daughter,*

*Mother*

*P.S. I have written Mrs. Houghton that Lucille must visit us here. Perhaps in the Spring it will not be too cold for her. May is always so lovely. We would be so happy to have such a fine American girl as a guest in our house.*

Thea reread the postscript. Lucille. She had almost forgotten their misunderstanding, if that was what it was. It was almost noon, time for lunch. Perhaps Lucille was downstairs. She paused before opening the door to her room. She did not want a confrontation of any sort, but she was a guest in this house and must follow rules. Luncheon was at 12 o'clock sharp.

Only Mrs. Houghton was downstairs. The dining room was already set for dinner that night. There were eleven place settings, one for Oliver! She smiled to herself and went into the drawing room.

"Oh, hello," said Mrs. Houghton. She looked very pretty in a becoming blue dress. "How was the newspaper?"

Thea unconsciously clasped her hands together and said nothing.

"Didn't you enjoy it?"

"I was very curious about it," she muttered. She had never lied before. Perhaps about little things, but never an out-and-out lie. "Oliver does like his work, doesn't he?"

"I guess," said Mrs. Houghton, fingering an intricately designed sherry glass in her hand. "Oliver has always been the more serious of the Whitfield boys. Always."

"The others? What are they like? I've only met Alliston once. He's very handsome."

"Bert — or Cuthbert is the most handsome. He's coming back soon from China. To live here. Didn't Oliver tell you?"

Thea didn't know what to do with her hands. She wondered if her face were as red as it felt. "No, he didn't mention anything."

"Come. Let's have a glass of sherry before lunch. We'll have to be on the terrace. Lucille's gone off with Ann Ravenel."

And they are talking about me, Thea said to herself. They are talking about Oliver and me. Lies. But Thea only said, yes, she would love a glass of sherry.

She sat opposite Mrs. Houghton, admiring how the blue of the dress reflected in her blue eyes. She had Lucille's eyes, the same shape, but her own eyes were as blue as the sky.

"Would you like for me to arrange flowers for tonight?" Thea asked. "I'm not as

good as you, but I'm rather good at it."

Mrs. Houghton said that would be "lovely." She added she was so pleased Oliver was coming.

Thea again said nothing. ~~She traced the design on the glass with her finger.~~

"You know there was once something between Lucille and Allison Whitfield."

Thea looked up instantly.

"Hasn't she ever discussed him with you? She was madly in love." She gave a little laugh. "If one can speak of love at the age of eighteen."

"What happened?" Thea tried to sound nonchalant, but her heart was beating rapidly.

Mrs. Houghton looked down into her glass. "He found someone else, I guess." She looked up. "From Charleston. Isn't that a coincidence? What Charleston has that attracts the Whitfield boys so I do not know. Except their mother has connections there."

"Lucille never mentioned anyone to me." So that was why Lucille criticized Oliver every chance she could get. Calling him strange, ugly, even evil. She was jealous of Thea. There it was. Oliver's brother had ignored her. Could it be true? Could Lucille have eyes for Oliver now? And if so, how in the world would she, Thea, handle such a thing?

"Is something wrong?" asked Mrs. Houghton. "Is the sherry not right?"

"Oh, no. It's fine." And it was. She needed this warmth the liquid had given her. She had needed it ever since she arrived back in the house. "The blue of your dress is

so becoming to you.”

Mrs. Houghton smiled like a girl. It occurred to Thea Mrs. Houghton received very few compliments. Yet it was she alone who guided this house, gave it its spirit, its elegance. No one helped her in this and no one ever thanked her.

“What do you think of a mixture of pink roses and white plumbago for the table?”

Thea was already picturing them in a silver epergne.

“Lovely,” said Mrs. Houghton. “The roses are at their height again.”

The honored guests that night were from Atlanta, a Mr. and Mrs. Calhoun. The wife, addressed as “Bit,” obviously because of her minute size and, Thea observed, her high childlike voice that sounded like a wailing ghost. The woman evidently saw herself in the same childlike way, since she was forever “on stage,” a little-girl acting with this one and that. Her husband was a giant of a man, a former football star and now a successful businessman whose company made pipes. The husband took an instant fancy to Thea, which annoyed the childlike wife. Thea saw it all and with effort tried to avoid the couple, but the man was continuously putting his arm about Thea’s waist and calling her “puddy” . . . “puddiest gull I ever saw . . .”

Thea was more than annoyed. She had never seen adult men and women carrying on so. Certainly there would never have been such a scene at her house in Norway. She was thinking of her mother entertaining the guests from Sweden. How formal her dinners always were, with elegant guests.

The Calhouns were visiting in Ashton so that Mr. Calhoun could look over

property he wanted to buy with future plans for quail hunting. "Got a whole bunch a people wanna go quail huntin, You wanna go with us, Tayuh?"

Thea smiled and said she did not think so.

"You make me so sad I gotta have me another drink." He asked Isaiah, whom he called "boy" though Isaiah was much older than Mr. Calhoun, to bring him another julep. "Heavy on the bubon, heah."

It was a dreadful evening so far. Oliver had not arrived. He had said he would be late and Lucille had a "date" with Max Anderson, a red-haired young man she thought she fancied a bit. Lucille had avoided Thea throughout the afternoon. When Thea was arranging the roses Lucille accidentally opened the door to the pantry where Thea was working and seeing Thea she instantly shut the door saying nothing. This cannot keep going on, Thea thought and vowed she would have a talk with Lucille. She could not go on this way. For as things were with Oliver Thea had no idea of leaving. When she did leave she would go to Minnesota to be with her mother in hopes Oliver would follow.

Included in the evening was a poet from Ashton and her husband. Thea tried to talk with her mainly to avoid the monster, as she thought of Mr. Calhoun. The poet's name was Irish, O'Casey, whom everyone called simply Annie. She was from a long line of Georgia O'Caseys, Irishmen attracted to Georgia's weather and way of life. Annie was a tall, dark-haired woman with penetrating blue eyes emphasized further with cosmetics. Thea, who scarcely wore any make-up, found herself appalled by some American women, even the older ones, who wore such garish colors on their faces. But Thea was taken with Annie O'Casey. She had traveled a great deal. She had not



visited Norway but she had spent time in Denmark. She was the more worldly of the people Thea had met since visiting the Houghtons.

“So---,” she asked, “are you learning more about our South?”

Thea smiled. “It’s all so different, so strange. I...” She started to continue but Oliver entered the room. He was wearing a dark suit that contrasted greatly with the other men in the room who were all dressed in white, a custom Thea had never witnessed before — a roomful of men in white suits.

Thea watched as Oliver entered the room, shook hands, vigorously, with Mr. Calhoun, who slapped him on the back, obviously an admiring gesture. Oliver nudged his shoulder and the two beamed in old-time friendship, though Mr. Calhoun could have been Oliver’s father.

When Thea saw he was approaching her, she immediately asked a question intended to take a lengthy answer. “What do you think is the future of lyric poetry in America?”

But the voice came from afar:

“You tryin to steal my gull, Oliver?”

Oliver merely smiled back at the man and then kissed Annie O’Casey on the cheek. He pretended to ignore Thea, though she was aware of his hasty glances as he tried to concentrate on Annie O’Casey. Thea wanted to hide her smile with her hand. In no way did he want these people to know his true interest in this room. But it was there for all to see if they read his face closely. There was a light in his face, one only a lover could exhibit, enrapture with the world. Thea saw it and felt her whole body almost lift.

She believed she had never known such happiness even in the hills and mountains of Norway when she was a child hiking with her father the great way in the summers. Not even then was there this peculiar happiness.

"We were speaking of lyric poetry," said Annie O'Casey, her dark sophistication a complete contrast to Thea's vulnerable blondness. Thea herself saw the difference and wondered if Oliver did as well. Was he attracted to lady poets? Certainly there was much more in common there than with a simple girl from Norway who could only write a letter and did not like that particularly. At table they were seated next to each other, Thea and Oliver. Thea, of course, wondered if Mrs. Houghton were sending her a silent message, a coy one that said she had observed and now knew their secrets. When Oliver seated her, he whispered at the top of her head, "you're gorgeous." And Thea felt the rush of blood to her face. Surely someone had heard.

But obviously they had not. The conversation was at once about the coming Presidential election.

"Edith Wilson's runnin the Whaat House and the whole damn country," shouted Mr. Calhoun.

"Just because you're the only Republican in the room you don't have to insult a fine woman like Edith Wilson," countered Senator Houghton. "And watch your language, sir."

"Isn't it pleasant," said Mrs. Calhoun in her child's voice, "that we can all have discussions and nobody gets mayed."

Silence. The only sound was Senator Houghton's fork loudly scraping across his plate.

"Well, I'm not mad at anybody. Y'all gone lose. Harding's in already." Mr. Calhoun wiped his mouth with a fervor. "Oliver, they printed one yo fool editorials in The Journal yesterday. Why you so ginst Harding."

"Because I'm a fool, I guess," Oliver said, smiling at the man. Everyone else laughed. Nervously, forced.

"As much a Southerner as you are, Calhoun, I can't see how in the wull you call yourself a Republican," snorted the Senator. "Hey, boy, we need some more wine."

Thea closed her mind to the conversation. She was interested only when Oliver was speaking. He spoke well, with a quiet authority. There was so much stifled anger in the room. The light from the candles fairly swayed with it. Mrs. Houghton broke into the talk by announcing Thea had arranged the roses on the table. There were murmurings of praise and Thea was pleased mainly because Oliver was hearing the compliments.

"Looks just like one," said Mr. Calhoun.

"What?" asked Mrs. Houghton.

"That gull there, Tayuh. Looks just like a damn rose."

"You ought not to use such language," said Mrs. Calhoun in her baby voice.

"Oh well---" Mr. Calhoun muttered in a lower voice. "Still looks like a damn rose."

Both Oliver and Thea tried to hide their laughter. Thea with her napkin and Oliver with his fist to his mouth. "Damn rose," Oliver said to her when nobody was listening. And Thea again put the napkin to her lips. She had never wanted to laugh so

much in all her life. But that was the way she felt most of the time when Oliver was near. Laughter and lightness and the wanting to be near him, touch him, always.

"Harding or Cox---" The voices faded away and Thea drank the wine before her, feeling its warmth, wishing everyone would disappear and there would be only herself and Oliver. She and Oliver. Oliver and I. No one else. Ever.

After dinner the two did manage to wander out onto the terrace. The air was filled with the sweetness of honeysuckle and Tea Olive, and above the sad figure of trees was the risen moon, full in the dark heaven looking down on the world. It was so light Thea pushed Oliver back when he attempted to kiss her.

"They'll see," she said.

"Who cares?"

Thea turned from him. "I want to talk. I have to talk to someone."

Oliver gently took hold of her shoulders and turned her to him. "What's the matter?"

He was frowning in the moonlight and everything was so lovely Thea thought she should not ruin the evening with her petty quarrel with Lucille. But she told him everything, adding that she felt like a stranger in the house, staying where she most decidedly was not wanted. "But Mrs. Houghton has been so sweet, truly sweet. I doubt if she knows anything about Lucille. Why doesn't she like you? Has she ever liked you?"

Oliver leaned against the wooden railing and looked down as he rubbed his left

hand with his right, a familiar thinking gesture.

"I don't think it's so much she's not wild about me. More Allison. She used to go with him some, I gather."

"What happened?"

"I don't know." He gave a short laugh. "Lucille's like a child to me. I keep thinking she's thirteen or something."

"We're the same age."

Oliver smiled down at her. "But you are such a wise child."

"I'm no child."

"No." He smiled. "You're not."

Thea asked what happened between Lucille and Allison.

"I wasn't there. But from all I gather she practically drove the whole family crazy — coming by the house, writing letters, telephoning at all hours, haunting the place. Allison got tired of it, I guess. I don't know." He put his arm around Thea's waist. "But let's talk about something else. Us."

Thea stepped back. Mrs. Houghton was on the terrace. She appeared agitated. "Thea?"

And there was something in the voice, an urgency, sadness, panic that caused Thea's heart to quicken. Lucille. Something has happened to Lucille. Or was it Oliver? Did she disapprove of their being absent from the guests? "Mrs. Houghton?"

Oliver, too, stared at the woman.

"Both of you. Come inside." She almost whispered the words.

"What is it?" Thea asked, hearing the half-panic in her own voice. By instinct she knew the unthinkable had happened. Her mind whirled. The Senator? Something was wrong. She looked up at Oliver and his lips were pressed together as he, too, followed Mrs. Houghton, her skirt lifted as she made her way up the stone steps to the porch.

She opened the heavy door that led to the music room. There were no guests there. Thea heard them talking in the drawing room. But this room fairly shouted its silence. A fear gripped Thea, one she had never known before. Something otherworldly had happened.

Mrs. Houghton went to the door of the room and closed it, then she made sure the shutters were secured. Thea stared at her, her rose dress, her very prettiness. Her actions were slow, studied.

"Be seated, please."

Thea and Oliver sat on the small settee. Mrs. Houghton stood.

"Thea, dear." She brought out a lace handkerchief from beneath her long sleeve and then she began twisting her wedding ring. Her face was different, not the soft pretty face Thea had come to know. Rather, now, it was a harsh face, her lips pressed together, her brow wrinkled. "I don't know," she said. "I don't know how to tell you."

Thea rose. "What is it?" And then she knew. "Home. Is something wrong?"

Mrs. Houghton only nodded and looked down at her ring.

Thea pulled at her arm. "What is it?"

"Your father, Thea."

The face in front of Thea faded. "Dead?"

Mrs. Houghton nodded.

Thea stared at the woman, not believing, seeing her father's face, so healthy, so like her own, full of life, teasing, loving life.

"Your mother cabled Washington. The Embassy there. They phoned just now."

Thea said nothing.

"It was his heart, I gather. Sudden. Dead. Your mother is waiting. I'm so sorry. So very sorry."

Oliver was at her side. "When did it happen?"

"This morning. I don't know the time in Kristiania."

Mrs. Houghton hugged Thea. And for some unknown reason Thea rebuffed the kindness, stood alone. She wanted nothing from this room, no kindness, no words. She started toward the door, "I must go."

"The Senator's arranging your passage."

Thea was suddenly sobbing.

"They are waiting for you. The funeral service---. Also for your sister Martha. That's what your mother wants. For you two girls to be present for the service. She's waiting."

Thea fled the room, not once glancing back.