

CHAPTER FIVE

Thea awakened early and quickly dressed. The ship was nearing Kristiania harbor. She stood alone on deck watching the white caps of the sea and the sky with its purple streaks intercepted with flashes of reds and oranges. She believed she had never seen such a sight — ethereal, haunting. It was the way she pictured death as a child, from a Biblical picture, man entering a heaven with purple streaks and red and orange in the sky.

The air was pure and fine. It was as if she had been freed from something, the heaviness of the American South. And then she thought of Oliver, his helpfulness at the train in Atlanta as she was handed her lengthy ticket which was to take her to New York and thus to his very moment. His face now seemed to be in the sky, a strong yet lonely face. It seemed she had discovered something new almost daily about this man who had so thoroughly taken her love.

Their drive to Atlanta was made mostly in silence. She felt comfortable with the silence and Oliver appeared to sense this. He knew, he said, what she was feeling. But he did not know. He did not know her father, his particular charm, his high humor and energy. But Oliver did know death from his own father, and all deaths, she guessed, were similar in one particular way. There would never be a return. Ever.

At the train Oliver seated her, saw to her luggage and when the train was about to leave he kissed her forehead.

"Don't forget me," he said. "Write. Write every day."

And he was gone, a face perhaps only to remember. She had no idea whether she would ever see him again. The thought compounded her grief and she waved at the tall awkward figure as the train began to move. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She turned to see him walking away, his head lowered. When would she ever see him again? The Houghtons said nothing about her returning and, in fact, returning was the last thought in her mind — until she saw Oliver walking away, walking out of her life. With his head lowered.

The ship was approaching the docks and Thea thrilled at the sight — the homely dark docks with men and women all holding bouquets in their hands, meeting someone, loving someone. She could scarcely make out their faces in the distance. She narrowed her eyes, trying to see her mother in the crowd.

At last she saw her. Astrid, a slender figure holding flowers, and yes, Uncle Brandt — so stately tall in a black suit, his white hair as fair as the sea caps. They were

alike, her uncle and her mother, except for their hair. Astrid's hair was dark, almost black. But both had the same broad forehead and determined jaw. They most decidedly were brother and sister. Her mother's grey eyes looked searchingly toward the ship and Thea began to wave frenetically. They merely stood, waiting, searching.

In time she was in their arms, laughing and sobbing all at once. And she sobbed all the way to the automobile. Her uncle drove and Thea and Astrid sat in the back.

"It's all right, Thea," Astrid said softly.

"Has Martha come?"

"In a few days." Astrid put her arm about Thea's shoulders as she had done so often when Thea was a child.

"Did he suffer?"

Astrid shook her head slowly and tears welled up in the great lovely eyes. "No," she said quietly. And for the first time Thea noted the few grey strands in her mother's dark hair. They had not been there when she left almost a year ago.

Thea turned from her. The weather was cool, almost cold for June. Or perhaps she had become so accustomed to heat. But the coolness delighted her. She told Astrid. She had almost gotten used to heat. Almost. She found herself chatting. A nervous chatter. They drove through Karl Johanegaten.

Nothing had changed, not one shop, one inn, hotel. She even recognized a policeman and waved at him. He waved back smilingly. There was such freedom.

But when they reached the house Thea felt the hurt about her heart again, a small little hurt that traveled to her throat. She looked at the house. Her father would

not be inside. She had never returned to this house without him. He was the house, the energy of him dominating. He was the noise in the house, he was the laughter, the intellect, the sensitivity. Her mother's unimposing nature was quiet. Her father reigned. It was his manner, never offensive, only joyous.

"Oh," Thea said as she surveyed the house. It was a tall house, four stories with a large library on the second floor, where her father always could be found reading. She regarded the red geraniums outside the library windows. They were so healthy, so red, cheerful as if no hurt had come to this house, which in miniature could have been a dolls house decorated with happy shutters and flowers, flowers everywhere.

"Well," said her Uncle Brandt, struggling with Thea's luggage. "Let us go in and have champagne. This is an occasion, your return."

"Yes," said her mother softly.

Thea's spirits began to lift. She had forgotten. Sentimentality was almost a sin in this household. Morbidity was for the foreign. Grief was stoic. One lived one's life and then that life ended. "Takk fur alt" was written on many a grave. A simple thank you to those who remained. Death was mere nature.

But those who remain, Thea was thinking. She looked at her mother. For the first time she saw age there. It was not just the streaks of grey in her hair. It was in her eyes, a dullness Thea had never seen before. Nor had she ever seen the puffiness that intruded on the lovely lines of that face. It was as if widowhood had been with her for years, not a ^gmore fortnight.

"When will Martha come?" Thea tried to force cheer in her voice. Astrid

appeared to brighten. "Soon." She inspected Thea as if for the first time. "You are looking well. I believe America becomes you."

And for the first time since she had seen Astrid Thea thought of Oliver. He seemed so far away. It was as if he had never existed, a dream, all of it. This was the real world, this place whose very air lifted the soul. Her father would never meet Oliver. Was he real?

"Come," said Astrid. "Let's see what Ulla has prepared for luncheon."

Ulla was at the door, a middle-aged woman with graying blond hair and a smile so broad it seemed her face might break with it. Thea hugged her. She loved this woman who had been their cook and friend and companion throughout all her life. She had not realized how much she had missed her, missed everything. Ulla was wearing a black uniform with a white apron exhibiting tatting around the edges. She had dressed up for Thea, smiling to erase the sorrow in the house. Thea felt the tears come to her eyes.

"Ah now," said Ulla almost rudely. "Hush that. We do not weep. Your father would not like it so."

Thea half laughed and wiped her eyes. She looked about the wide hallway at all the familiar things. The house was so very cheerful with a large vase holding red berries on the familiar mahogany table. She looked to the left where the Gobelin tapestry hung and then on instinct she half ran through the hall to the back window of the house where the sloping lawn lay green all the way down to the Kristiania fjord. The water fairly gleamed in the sunlight. How beautiful it all was. Her great-grandfather had

built this house and her father dearly loved it. Regarding the scene before her, Thea sighed with its beauty. It was all so different from the American South. The houses there were so dark inside with their English furniture and foreboding portraits. Here there was a light and color albeit most from ages past.

They entered the Drawing Room where Uncle Brandt was holding an opened bottle of champagne. He held the bottle with a napkin trimmed in lace. Thea stood admiring him, wishing she could paint him, paint the high color of his face, the reddened cheeks, the light blue eyes, the fair hair, the tallness and thinness of him, holding the bottle, smiling as if death would never enter their lives again, as if it had never come.

Astrid was smiling too and Thea looked from her face to the portrait of her above the two French chairs. In the portrait she was wearing a green dress with no adornments except the beauty of her face and slender figure. But her grey eyes, even then in youth, had a sadness in them as if she saw her life ahead, perhaps this very moment.

Thea took the glass from her uncle and the bubbles burned her eyes. But the warmth was welcomed, easing the hurt inside. Joy and pain. They both were her companions.

"Welcome," said Uncle Brandt, bowing from the waist. "Welcome home."

"How good it is to be here." Thea hesitated. "Even . . ." She did not finish. She looked toward the entrance of the room. At any minute she expected her father to enter, bringing with him his special charm. She pictured him in her mind. She did look like him

in the Nordic way his blue eyes slanted upward. She also had inherited his height and blondness and high cheekbones.

His portrait was in the upstairs gallery along with all the other Aaker forebears. As a child Thea used to study the faces there, see traits from one generation to the next, note the change of dress from century to century. "Speak," she used to say to the faces, but they only followed her with their blue eyes, silent. Only her father seemed to speak, laughing with her, guiding her.

Thea watched as Astrid sat in one of the two settees next to the rounded fireplace in the corner of the room. Her dark hair contrasted with the lightness of the room — white with pale blues and greys. Thea sat opposite her.

"Was he sick? Did he complain?"

"Christian never complained. You know that. Ulla found him."

Thea stared. "Where?"

"In bed. Ulla brought up breakfast."

Thea saw the scene as if it were she who held the tray. Her father in his great bed — white, dead.

"It was his heart? Did you know he had a failing heart?"

Astrid shook her head and looked down at the glass in her hand. "When I think of it — when I think of that day, the preceding day — he had been very quiet, unusually quiet."

The doorbell chimed — like sleigh bells. The sound startled Thea and she sat straighter. Who? She wanted to see no one. She wanted to share this time with her

mother and uncle. There was no one in the world she wanted to see.

She heard Ulla's voice in the hallway, cheerfully greeting the comer. And then she recognized the other voice. Halvor. He was coming to call as if he were expected, as if he were a lover. Thea looked at Astrid first, then her uncle. They were both frowning, not wanting their little ceremony interrupted. But Thea watched the door expectantly.

Her first thought when she saw him was how young he looked. He was the same age as Lucille's friends in Georgia but he looked so much younger than they and certainly younger than Oliver. He could have still been in his teens. He stood in the doorway, it seemed to Thea, for hours before anyone said anything. His handsome face was somber, fitting the occasion. He was tall, taller than Oliver, and his face had a puckish look with his slightly turned-up nose, high cheekbones, and blue eyes. His hair was auburn and as he stood his hair caught the lights from the windows at the side.

"Why, Halvor?" Astrid said, rising from the settee.

"Fru Aaker," he said and Thea remembered his voice, deep and lilting. Yet he was a stranger to her. He was not as she pictured him in her mind — so young in reality and yet he was studying for his doctor's degree at the university in Sweden. He must be twenty-five or twenty-six, Thea was surmising.

"You see, our Thea has arrived," her mother said.

Halvor looked at Thea and smiled faintly, then he looked back at Astrid. "I am so very sorry."

Thea rose and went to him. Saying nothing, she took hold of both his hands and

at arms length attempted to smile. He was so young and awkward and the sweetness of him caused the tears to come again. But then he exhibited such alarm that Thea dropped his hands immediately and turned.

"Come, Halvor," her mother said. "We are having champagne, a little celebration in honor of Thea."

"I must go," he said, half turning.

Thea wanted to ask him to stay. It was all so awkward. But the first sight of him told her something: how much she had grown away from him, not only him but everything. There was England and America between them. She had changed and he had not.

Watching him leave she said out loud: "Why can't things stay the same?"

"Everything changes," said her uncle. "Even the trees you think will be here forever." He drank from his glass. "The tragedy of life perhaps." He was staring at the doorway as if a ghost had disappeared.

"Thea, you should have urged Halvor to stay. How good of him to come." Astrid was seated again.

"It was."

"You were almost rude," Astrid said, inspecting Thea's face, frowning. "You mustn't forget your manners. Has America done this to you?"

Thea shook her head. She was thinking of Oliver. Odd, when she was there, in Georgia, she thought of Halvor, though in a different way than he appeared now. But when she was here she thought of Oliver, remembering him as he left the railway

station, his head lowered. He seemed almost old to her, a mature man. Whereas Halvor exhibited such youth, energy.

Outside on the hall table Thea glimpsed a small envelope. "Thea" was written on it. It was Halvor's handwriting. She took the envelope upstairs to her room and, lying across the high bed, opened the envelope:

Dear Thea:

I have never been good at this. But you must know how sorry I am about your father. I admired him more than any man I have ever known. You know this, probably always have.

I am glad beyond knowing that you are home. Can't we see each other when you are more comfortable? I work through the summer and then return to Gotenborg for more study in the autumn.

Have courage.

Halvor

"Dear Halvor," she muttered and immediately answered. She said she would be glad to see him any time and thanked him for writing. She then walked the way to his parents' house, a familiar walk she had done practically every day of her life. She left the note in the mailbox. Dear Halvor. Dear Halvor, her mind was repeating over and over.

On Wednesday the three of them, Astrid, Uncle Brandt and she went to the docks to meet Martha. They watched as the great ship made its way to the harbor from far away China.

"It's so exciting," Thea said, taking a firmer grasp of the roses she held in her hand. Seven roses. Her mother held daisies and Uncle Brandt blue violets. Together the combination would make a lovely bouquet for Martha's room. All about people held flowers, waiting. Thea could scarcely breathe with the excitement. She hadn't seen Martha in two years or more. And suddenly she was with them — Martha with her teasing brown eyes and fair hair, as electric as ever hugging Astrid, Thea and Uncle Brandt. She was more beautiful than Thea remembered. For a brief moment she felt the old envy. They were different in looks. Martha was more her mother's child in looks and Thea, of course, had her father's looks. But as Thea watched she saw her father's being, the way he raised his brows, the move of his head, all of it. It was almost as if her father himself had returned.

On the way home Thea listened to Martha, her questions, the same questions Thea herself had asked and whose answers she would never completely comprehend. But what she really wanted to ask her sister was had she met Oliver's brother in Shanghai. She wanted to know what he looked like, what Martha thought of him, what he said, how he said it. She wanted to know everything, especially Martha and Gunnar's reaction to the man who one day might be her brother-in-law.

But during the drive Martha had become almost silent and when they reached the house she stopped talking altogether. Inside the hallway she put her hand to her mouth and ran the distance to the downstairs powder room. Thea followed her to the door and cringed at the sound of her vomit. How differently the two reacted to this momentous happening in their lives. Martha was so energized in personality that her

father's death made her viscerally ill, whereas, she, Thea, held her grief and was unable to purge it.

She turned and saw Astrid's stricken face, white as the walls of the house. Thea went to her and hugged her. She was thinking families were not units, each was separate, each grief was separate. And there was selfishness, each clinging to one's own precious pain.

"I fear you have reared two selfish daughters," Thea muttered.

"No, I am doubly blessed." Astrid smiled then. "I hope it will be the same for you one day."

Thea stood apart then and lowered her head. Had her mother sensed something? Do mothers know everything? Her mother knew nothing of Oliver, but Thea had written about him, asked in that one letter to write to Martha about Oliver's brother, Cuthbert. Did she reveal everything in the one small request?

Martha emerged slowly from the powder room, her face voided of all its high energy. "I'm sorry," was all she said, "but everything is so changed."

Everything had changed. As the days followed one after the other Thea could not accustom herself to the enormous absence in her life, in the house, in the city, in the world. Even the city was changing. Kristiania soon would be named Oslo, the original name of the city. All the signs in shop windows and roads would change. The whole world had changed.

The funeral in the Lutheran church was brief. Afterward Thea walked with her

mother and sister in the rain, not caring that she was soaked to the skin. At the cemetery many friends and family members stood about and Thea stared at the arrangement of wild flowers on her father's casket as if it were someone else's casket, not her father's, not his. The city had been suffering a drought ~~through the summer~~ ~~months~~ and now the rain poured as if it were a gift from him, who was merely on a trip somewhere, far away.

They left the cemetery and silently entered the busy world.

Within the week Thea had another note from Halvor asking to see her. They walked along the fjord and watched the blue and white sails. It was a Sunday night and the light gleamed on the water, exhibiting red and orange colors in the sky that in turn reflected on the tips of the sails.

It was dark in the American South, Thea was telling Halvor. In the summer it is black dark, she said, not like this, light and airy and friendly. Halvor was deeply interested in everything she said about America. He had recordings at the university and played American music, jazz and blues. His idea of America was so different from reality. He romanticized the South, speaking of black people and cotton and great mansions. He did not know the poverty she had seen among both the black and white people. She tried to explain that only a very few lived in mansions and many of those houses were in constant need of repair.

"The dirt is red," she said, "as red as the sky right now."

"Red?"

Thea nodded. She observed Halvor's profile, so boyish and handsome. Halvor had been the smartest student in their school. And now he was to become a doctor, a healer. He wanted to leave Norway, perhaps go to China. He very much wanted to talk to Martha. He wanted to start a hospital in China.

"And bring a little of Norway there?" Thea asked.

Halvor laughed. He was fascinated with the idea of China, as fascinated with China as he was with America. A dreamer, he was always talking of far places: Africa, Australia. Thea never thought such dreams matched his scientific exactness. Halvor, she thought, should have been an artist or a writer, a wanderer. The exactness of science was foreign to his true nature.

"And will you go with me?"

Thea quickly looked at him and saw the seriousness of the question. His eyes narrowed. She wanted to hug the innocence of him. Hurt was the last thing she could let herself bring him.

"Martha says it can be very lonely in Shanghai, but she's made English and American friends, a few." She was chatting nervously, but the somber face of Oliver was before her.

"You aren't answering me," Halvor said.

"You're not leaving tomorrow," Thea said, half laughing. She looked at him again, his fair hair tossed about in the wind. His cheeks had high color and his face was tanned from the sun. How truly handsome he was. She was vaguely aware of the people about them, healthy and living this night, enjoying the water and wind, but,

more, there was Halvor's hurt face.

"I have missed all this," Thea said. "I didn't realize how much."

Halvor stopped walking and Thea looked back at him. "What's wrong?"

"You've met someone. Haven't you? In America?"

Thea merely stared at him. It was true: as children they both seemed to know what the other was thinking. But now? How could ~~be~~^{he} possibly know this?

"I've met many people," Thea heard herself mumbling but all the time examining his face, again so haunting in the beauty of the Nordic "night."

"You've changed, Thea." He began walking again and Thea rested her back on the railing that protected pedestrians from the water, which was now choppy and nervous. She was wondering if she should tell Halvor about Oliver. She thought not. She did not have the courage.

He stood beside her looking out at the water and the sky. "I've always thought we would marry," he said.

"We were very young."

"So we were."

They stood watching the last of the sails turn a corner and vanish. There were only the seagulls and the color of the sky changing from red to purple. Only lonely people look at the sky, Thea was thinking. And they both were that, lonely, she and Halvor who would say goodbye and lead separate lives and probably never meet again.

"I must go," she said and she felt tears in her eyes.

Halvor said nothing and they walked back to the house in silence.

The next day brought a letter from Oliver. She saw his pinched handwriting as the letter lay with others on the hall table. For the first time she had been home a sense of true gladness filled her. It lasted for only a moment and then doubt came as well as a timid fear. He, the author of the letter, seemed years ago, as if she were an old woman thinking about a young impossible love.

She thought of Halvor's broken face last night as they bid each other good night, probably for the last time in her life. As she stared at the letter something in her wanted to run back to Halvor. He has home, here, Norway. The writer of the letter was far away, someone in a dream.

My dearest Thea:

I write to you tonight from my "lovely cabin" as you call it. To say that I miss you cannot be written. But I do and think of you constantly, even in the midst of an editorial. Please return so that I can think again.

Do give your mother and sister my sincere condolences. I hope you are healing a bit, though I know those wounds never leave you. I wish I were there to help you.

In your absence I have been reading the next best thing to you, your fellow Scandinavian Kierkegaard. The following struck a discordant chord in my aching heart and I wondered if he ever knew love as I do now.

What is happiness? A ghost which is only when it has been . . . What is memory? A burdensome consoler, a knave who wounds from behind, a shadow one cannot sell even if somebody would buy it! . . . What is expectation? A flying arrow which does not take off. What is fulfillment? An arrow which misses the mark. . . .

You must not believe this! Please write to me as much as possible. Then I'll know you are not a shadow or a flying arrow or, God help us, a memory.

I send you my love, my dearest love, and wait to hear from you.

Ever,

Oliver

P.S. My mother would like for you to visit us here as soon as you can come. Lucille Houghton has been impossible. I will explain when I see you again. Again, I love you more than anyone I have ever known. O.

Thea read and reread the letter. She was back in Georgia again, feeling the heat, smelling the odor of honeysuckle and the dreaded turnip greens cooking all morning long for the heavy midday lunch. But she remembered, too, the small waterfall that fell into the muddy pond and the feel of Oliver's cabin, with the odor of tobacco clinging to the leather-bound books. She remembered him, so different from Halvor, so assured in his career and life. She remembered his kisses. She was back in Georgia, wanting a man, this man, the writer of this letter.

She folded the letter and in a daze sat in the rocking chair in her room staring at the happy flowers placed in the room, so cheerful, bright, though the house was heavy with grief and her odd longings were too complex to unravel. No longer could she keep all this inside. She would have to say something to Martha and her mother.

Still, she wondered if such an announcement would further grieve Astrid. For she knew now that marrying Oliver Whitfield far outweighed plans for staying here. The latter was the correct thing to do, she knew, but a life far away was forcing her. She thought of the house she and Oliver would build one day. It would have Scandinavian

touches as well as Southern and in her mind she saw it — white and cheerful and a garden filled with every flower and plant known to the South. A happy place it would be.

But to leave Norway forever? The thought was unbearable. It would be another death and she wondered if she could bear them both. She would miss so much — the mountains, sea and valleys, apples in the autumn and the howling great winters. Grief in two separate languages. But. . . . And she placed the letter down with authority. Now. . . .

Martha and Astrid were downstairs looking over the silks Martha had brought from Shanghai.

“Oh, good,” Astrid said when Thea entered the library. “Look what Martha has brought you.”

Thea looked at the dark red silk. It had tiny gold circles in it that shimmered and changed colors with each movement of the tree branch outside. She would frame it, she thought, and hang it in her and Oliver’s new house.

“A wedding present,” she said aloud. The words just came. She hadn’t meant to say them. Both her mother and Martha were staring at her, Astrid alarmed, Martha curious.

“Halvor?” Astrid queried.

Thea shook her head solemnly.

“What are you trying to say?” Martha was half screeching.

“Did you meet his brother?”

Martha kept staring and then she put her hand to her mouth. “Bert---Cuthbert?”

She ran to Thea. "You and Bert---"

"No, no, no." Thea watched as Astrid sat down on the straight chair near the display of silks. "I've never met him. It's his brother. Oliver." She was staring at her mother, seeing the hurt on her face, the alarm.

Martha came to her and hugged her. "Thea! He's so charming, handsome. Gunnar is very fond of him, and so am I. I meant to tell you."

Thea had not planned any of this. She had guarded her secret so long. But now she was released from it. Yet Astrid's face, the way she was frowning, made her uncomfortable. Also Martha's extreme exuberance was compounding everything.

"It's not Bert," Thea said again. "It's his brother."

Martha stood back. "Well, if he's anything like Bert he's--- Everyone in Shanghai likes Cuthbert Whitfield. He's amusing, charming, very handsome and very intelligent." She was actually beaming at Thea, but Thea suddenly wanted to cry. She was so confused, seeing Astrid's expression, so somber in contrast to Martha's.

"Nothing is decided for sure," Thea managed.

"I should think not," Astrid said. "We know nothing of this man. His family. Character. Nothing."

"They are considered very fine people, the Whitfields," Thea said and she sensed the emotion of defense in her, the edge of anger.

"That may be. But we certainly can't have a marriage until we know the man." Her mother was twisting her wedding ring. And Thea started to ask who was "we." There was no "we" any longer in this house. Only her mother, her beautiful frowning

mother. Soon Martha would leave and Thea knew, a decision made this moment, she would return to America. There would only be an "I" living here.

Astrid rose. She would have to discuss all this with Brandt, she was saying. "And the rest of the family." She would contact the embassy, have her cousin Kittelsby, who was with the Norwegian embassy in Washington, find out all he could about "this Oliver."

Thea smiled, but she wanted to laugh. She could only imagine Oliver's reaction to all this, as if he were a felon, an escaped criminal.

"This is not amusing, Thea."

"Mater," Martha said. (She had always called her mother that.) "You're being so old fashioned. This is the twenties. Men don't ask for the lady's hand anymore."

"Gunnar certainly did."

"That was because he was forced to."

"This family does not change tradition." And with that Astrid walked out into the hall, calling for Ulla.

But Martha hugged Thea again and the two sat on the settee while Thea told her sister all about Oliver. It was a release, the telling, and she sensed a healing.

"A journalist," Martha was saying. "How interesting." Her eyes were shining.

Thea nodded. "He has his own newspaper — a small one, but it's his. And we're going to build a wonderful house and. . . ."

Suddenly Martha's twinkling brown eyes were filled with tears.

"What is it? Martha?"

"We'll be so far apart. China. Norway. America."

It was so. Thea was staring at the red and gold cloth, seeing the sudden changes in the gold. "We will visit," she said.

"Maybe," said Martha and turned her head.