

CHAPTER EIGHT

She came into the room like Spring. Thea had arranged a small vase of violets and was placing them on the table by the front door. She stood back, admiring her art and how nicely it fit with the silver card tray. Then she entered — a tennis racket, white short tennis dress, blond reddish hair and eyes as blue as the violets. Sarah Carr.

Thea stood back, her hand to her breast. All of it was startling, the energy, the smart dress, the light in the happy face. Thea found herself smiling, too.

“You’re Thea,” the girl said breathlessly.

“And you are Sarah.”

The girl nodded and placed her feet close together. “We expected you much earlier.” She was as tall as Thea.

“Oliver’s car went into a ditch.”

Sarah tossed her head back and laughed. “Always. He’s always doing that.”

It was the first time Thea heard laughter in this quiet house. It was welcoming. And she also liked the way Sarah spoke. She remembered Oliver or somebody telling her that the accent of Charleston was the same as the accent of Barbados. It was certainly different than that of Georgia. Whatever, it was a pleasant sound and Thea felt drawn to this friendly young woman who stood so properly with her feet placed just so.

"I'm so glad you're here," Sarah said. "Oh! Let me see." She was looking at Thea's left hand.

"You're engaged!" Sarah immediately hugged Thea, but Thea felt the familiar constraint. Would she ever get over her fear of this sudden affection? She liked Sarah Carr and she wanted her to like her as well. She drew back from her and teasingly nodded her head.

"See," said Sarah, holding out her own left hand. There shone a ruby ring, round and surrounded by smaller rubies and diamonds. It had an old-fashioned aura and Thea wondered if Allison chose it or was given it.

"It's so beautiful," Thea said. And she meant it. Her own was too showy, too large.

"Uh, huh," said Sarah. "We'll soon be two old married ladies. We'll be sisters!"

Thea beamed, thinking of Martha, seeing her features.

"Where are you?" Sarah asked.

"Where?"

"Your room?"

"Upstairs."

"Let's go up. I've got to change."

"I'm so---" Thea did not finish. Allison Whitfield was coming through the front door. At least she thought it was he. It had been so long since she had seen him.

"God help us," he said. "Oliver's in the ditch again."

Sarah Carr laughed and went to him, throwing her arms about his neck.

Thea dampened her lips and tried to smile. Allison Whitfield was better looking than Thea remembered. He was tall, taller than Oliver by half a head perhaps. And his hair was blond, blonder because of the sun. His teeth showed almost startlingly white against his deeply tanned face. A few wrinkles about his green eyes showed he met Sarah's gift for friendship. How could two brothers be so different, Thea was wondering. She remembered Allison was in banking, a far cry from the newspaper business.

Laughing, Allison escaped from Sarah's arms. "Thea, do you remember me? I certainly remember you."

"Indeed," Thea said. His winning smile prompted her own.

"They're engaged!" Sarah said.

"Who?" Allison looked questioningly at Thea.

"Oliver and Thea. Who else?"

Allison came to Thea and gently took her in his arms, then he stood back, still holding her hands. "I'll be damned," he said. "I've got a sister." He dropped Thea's hands and still regarding her put one hand to his chin. "I'd never have believed it."

Thea actually giggled. "What?"

"That my ugly old brother could get somebody as beautiful as you."

Sarah came to him and put an arm about his waist. "What about me?"

"What about you?"

"Aren't I beautiful?"

Allison pretended to study the question. "Uh, I don't know."

This bit of arch playfulness was uncomfortable for Thea. Their easy ways were enviable and she was seeing how suitable they were to each other. Why couldn't she be more like them? She felt so stiff and awkward, but she was smiling. Everyone in America smiled. She was seeing hundreds of thousands of smiling faces.

"I guess in your way you might be called attractive."

"Isn't he awful?" Sarah asked Thea.

"No," Thea beamed.

"Where is old Oliver?"

"He said he was going to see about his car."

Allison asked Thea just where they had left the car and Thea explained their ride into town, their meeting with the "bandits" as she called them.

Allison snapped his fingers. "I'd better go see if I can help." And he left, out the door, a dark figure into the white morning . . . a man suddenly fearful for his brother.

"He's so nice," Thea said to Sarah.

Sarah nodded. "But how terrible about those men! Oliver's liberalism is going to get him in trouble yet."

"I was terrified. Simply terrified. I wish you could have seen them."

"Oliver is so good."

"Yes. Yes, he is."

Sarah started up the stairway and she beckoned with her racket for Thea to follow. Sarah's room was down the hall from Thea's, a charming room with yellow flowered wallpaper. There was a fireplace and on the mantel were two blue vases with white lilies-of-the-valley, which instantly prompted Thea to think of Norway. In May young girls carried bunches of lilies-of-the-valley into the towns and cities. There were so many, they carried them in their arms — thousands of small white flowers carried by the young blond children of Norway. Suddenly, she wanted to be there. But she was not. She was in this over-heated room staring at wallpaper and the contrast caused her suddenly to want to weep. She was so tired.

"Have you set a date yet?" Sarah asked, as she took off her tennis dress and prepared for a shower, placing an enormous towel about her slender body.

"No." Thea looked at her ring. It still astonished her. "Oliver has to visit us in Minnesota before we set a date."

"Allison and I are going to be married October 25. Everyone will be back from the mountains by then."

Vaguely Thea remembered Oliver's saying something to the effect that most of Charleston had summer houses in the mountains or at the beaches.

"And I want you to be a bridesmaid."

Thea was so shocked she almost stumbled over the rocking chair near the bed.

"Me."

"Yes. You. Just think how sophisticated I will be, having a bridesmaid from Europe. You'll have all of Charleston at your feet with your blond good looks." She studied Thea. "Uh huh. You will."

All of his was happening too quickly. What if her mother didn't approve of Oliver? What if she absolutely disapproved?

Later that afternoon Thea learned that Viola Whitfield was an ill woman. Thea was dressing for dinner when Sarah, dressed in a long, French-blue dress that matched her eyes, entered her room. Thea was fastening one of the jade earrings she often wore because they were given to her by Martha. They hung long and emphasized her cheekbones and profile. Or so Martha told her.

"You look so pretty," Thea said to Sarah.

"Mrs. Whitfield always likes to dress for dinner. Such a bore."

Thea's dress was grey, one she had got in Sweden, and was the only long dress she owned. In Stockholm the clerk at the dress shop told Thea she looked "elegant." And Thea had laughed at the time. But now, this moment, she hoped she looked just that. For Oliver's sake.

She fastened the earring and turned from the mirror to Sarah.

"Does everybody in Norway look like you?" Asked Sarah. "I wish I had your hair. I wish I had never cut mine. Yours is so nice — up like that."

Thea smiled. "Yes," she said. "Most Norwegians are blond and blue-eyed. Except for my mother. She has very dark hair."

"Didn't you say she was in Minnesota? Will she come here?"

"Oh, I don't think so."

"Mrs. Whitfield would like for her to come, I know."

Thea stood. "What is she like, Sarah?"

"Mrs. Whitfield?"

Thea nodded.

Sarah glanced out the window, holding back the ruffled curtains. "She's ill, you know."

"No, I didn't."

Sarah turned, readjusting the curtain. What was she looking for outside, Thea wondered.

"Uh huh. Heart. Allison told me."

Something kin to disappointment came to Thea. Only now did she realize how taken she was by Oliver's mother. She had expected a long friendship.

"She's originally from Baltimore, very well-to-do — her friends in Charleston told me. "But---" Sarah sat in the wicker chair. "No, I shouldn't say it." "She never seemed to adjust to this place."

Thea said nothing. A great part of her understood, but she would not say that to Sarah. Maybe some day.

"Ashton is small and terribly provincial. Odd, too, because there is a great deal of money here---I mean, for so small a place. They're all land owners and own practically everything around here."

"How bad is Mrs. Whitfield's heart?"

"She's had two tremendous attacks, I guess. She has to be very careful and take pills all the time."

"Are we trouble to her?"

Sarah stopped rocking. "Not if she's near her beloved boys. When I start having children I'm never going to smother my children. I mean it."

Thea said she had seen the affection but not "smothering."

Sarah rose and went to the window again. "Here she comes," Sarah said with a half moan.

"Who?"

"Your friend. Lucille."

Thea felt her heart beat. "No."

Sarah beckoned her to the window.

Thea watched as below Lucille, dressed in light blue with tapering ruffled sleeves, slowly made her way up the gravel entrance way. Behind her was a young man in a straw hat. Someone Thea did not recognize. Lucille wore the same sneering smile Thea had come to know---or to look for---perhaps imagined. But the dress and her longer hair were becoming to her.

"Why?" asked Thea to no one in particular.

"Why what?"

"Why is she coming here?"

"Obviously she was invited. I suppose Mrs. Whitfield thought it was logical since

you two were such good friends." She examined Thea's face. "Aren't you?"

Thea nodded and said nothing.

"She's had dates with Allison," Sarah said. "And when she couldn't have him she went after Oliver. I can't stand her."

Thea felt the softening inside herself, a relaxing she hadn't felt since entering the house. She almost wanted to laugh. Just now, this moment, she believed she liked Sarah Carr better than any friend she had ever had.

Behind the couple, on the street, Thea saw Oliver getting out of his car. He was walking, rather loping, toward the house. She saw Lucille grin up at him, then introduce Oliver to the young man. Thea watched as they shook hands, the two men, Oliver taller and older than the other. She continued to watch as the threesome made their way to the house, Lucille chatting and Oliver listening. Oliver was always listening, to everybody with acute attention. One of his charms, Thea concluded.

"Well, let's go down to the slaughter." Sarah said.

And Thea giggled, one of the rare times in her life. She did not like the sound and vowed she would never do that again.

But Lucille, obviously, had not reached such a conclusion. She giggled throughout dinner, at everything. Nerves, Thea decided. For once Lucille was the only outsider. The young man accompanying her was a Whitfield cousin. Festus Isham of Atlanta. Oliver had not seen his cousin for some fifteen years. But he was taken by him, Thea could tell. Festus was quiet and had a subtle sense of humor with the Whitfield's (at least Allison's) good looks.

When the conversation remained too long on the subject of Charleston, Festus turned to Thea and said, "I'm sure all this fascinates you beyond words."

And Thea said, "Oh, no, I am interested."

"I'd rather hear about Norway," he said.

"Why, for heaven sakes," asked Lucille. And she smiled charmingly, glass in hand, at everyone at the table save Thea.

Thea's first instinct was to leave the table. But she continued sitting, her back rigid, saying nothing. Then she caught Sarah's gesture at the end of the table. She was wringing her hands in a choking manner, her face distorted with hatred.

The sight said everything and the seething inside began to relax.

Lucille had not observed Sarah, obviously. But Oliver had.

"Do that again, Sarah. It makes you look absolutely enticing."

Lucille gazed at Sarah, a gaze Thea had noted before; her mouth turned down, her eyes narrowed, the pupils of the eyes like pin pricks.

"Sometimes, Oliver," said Sarah, "I think you see things that aren't there."

"Possible," mumbled Oliver and then surprisingly pushed back his chair and stood. For a moment Thea thought he was going to say something to Lucille. But instead he announced flatly that he was leaving.

"Whatever for?" asked his mother from the head of the table.

"Work. Tomorrow is always tomorrow's newspaper."

And he was gone without a word to Thea. Nothing. She sat there, alone. It was she who was the outsider now. Not Lucille.

Oliver did not return to the house that night, and he was not present at breakfast. Thea did not sleep the entire night. Certainly his was not the actions of a man in love. In no way. Thea scrambled these thoughts as she tossed in the high bed.

Viola was the only one present for breakfast, which had been prepared in lighted silver dishes along the sideboard. Thea had dressed early and thought she might take a walk about the gardens. She needed the exercise.

But Viola called her from the hall. "I'm so glad you're up. I loathe breakfasting alone." She was dressed in a long-sleeved beige cotton dress which emphasized the depth of her dark eyes.

Thea entered the dining room, the same room of her humiliation last night. But she played the part of the cheerful guest.

"What a lovely day," she said. "I thought I might walk through your garden."

"You can do that any time." Viola touched her napkin to her lips. "Come, have a little breakfast."

Eating was the last thing Thea wanted. She took a plate. Grits, fried apples, eggs, cheeses, biscuits, muffins — all of it was nauseating. She took some of the apples and a glass of orange juice.

"You're not a breakfast person either," said Viola.

"No, I'm not." Which was a lie. At home she always loved breakfasts — everyone cheerful, planning the day, loving the new day. The northern sun always streamed into the room, pointing to berries and flowers and young faces.

Thea sat staring down at her plate.

"You must be patient with Oliver, Thea," said Viola, lifting a cup of tea.

Thea looked at her. Was she that obvious? She said nothing, merely looked at the woman, who always had tea, never coffee.

"Oliver has always worked. Nothing stands in his way. Not me, his brothers, no one. He's always been that way."

Thea dampened her lips. "It's good to work hard." She looked away.

"He's been that way all his life, even as a child. One-minded, I always say. His father was the same. Never here."

Thea looked back at her, remembering Sarah's words that Viola Whitfield was an ill woman. Now, sipping her tea, she showed no signs of illness, only trouble — concern in her dark eyes, long concern, years.

"You seem such a sensible girl. I don't believe you will bother with little things."

"Thank you," Thea said and realized she was speaking in Norwegian. She was satisfied to please this woman.

"An absent husband is a little thing, if you know him well."

Thea suddenly caught a glimpse of her ring. She believed she would never get used to it, shining now in the stream of light that came from the partially opened draperies.

"I learned to spend time with the children, the boys." Viola was smiling. "They took up my time, I must say."

"He was never here?" Thea asked, staring at the delicate turn of the tea cup

Viola was holding. "Your husband?"

"Oh yes, of course. But much of the time he was busy. The South was still recovering, trying to, and Oliver — Oliver Senior — was successful. He made money, you know — in textiles. And there was always the bank here and the one in Decatur. Always busy." She placed the teacup on the saucer, carefully. "And then we began to travel. Those were the happiest days. In your Norway. Russia." She appeared to sigh. "And then he died. The boys were gone."

In her mind Thea saw the empty house, this house, only furniture where people once were, great silences, the creaking of an old house, long afternoons, darkness — a great, open, yawning cave with no one in it except a woman wondering how quickly life was finished.

"You're from Baltimore, Sarah tells me," Thea said.

"Yes." She smiled then almost like a young girl. "I loved all that country. I think when I left Baltimore it was eighteen years before I saw it again." She looked away. "Times were hard here."

Thea said nothing. Would her own life be like that? Would it be twenty years before she saw Norway again?

"But, now, on to more cheerful things. When will the wedding be?"

Thea felt her heart quicken. The transition was too sudden — from darkness to harsh light. The change was so sudden she felt actually jolted.

"Are you all right?"

Thea quickly looked up at her and nodded.

"You're so pale. I've frightened you with talk of loneliness and — Certainly no subject for morning."

Thea smiled.

Viola asked once again if she were all right.

And Thea wondered if her face was that easy to read. She tried to smile again. "My mother wants to meet Oliver. She doesn't want me to marry before he meets our family."

"Why, of course," said Viola. "She must come here."

"Mother wants Oliver to come to Minnesota. That's where she is now, visiting her cousin."

"Then we'll scheme," said Viola, an actual twinkle in the large dark eyes. "We'll see that he puts — work — in the background for a while."

Thea said nothing, then she leaned forward toward the woman. "I don't want to live like that." She just came out with it.

"Like what?"

"Alone. I want a family with a husband who will be with me."

"My dear, Oliver will be with you, if not physically." She was actually smiling. "He's--he's a free spirit. I've never tried to bind that."

Thea narrowed her eyes as she watched the woman's every gesture — the napkin to the lips, the gaze toward the window, the slight frown and then the softer look as she turned to Thea.

"I think you are very wise," Thea said, and she meant it. Her father was a "free

spirit," roaming mountains, sailing, greeting people, walking, striding--striding like Oliver. Was that what attracted her to Oliver? The similarity? No one bound her father's freedom either.

Viola placed her napkin on the table and rose from the chair. "Two tickets for Minnesota," she said.

Then added: "And how many returns?"