

## CHAPTER TEN

Her arrival in Minneapolis was in dark contrast to her departure from Atlanta. For one thing neither her mother nor Lena Anderson were there to meet her. Instead, a rather elderly man, who later identified himself as a professor at the college, met her. The Bishop, Lena Anderson's husband, had suffered a stroke.

"Oh, no," Thea said. She asked how serious it was.

"Very serious, I fear," said the man.

Thea instantly thought of Oliver. He could not possibly visit now. And certainly it was no time to plan a wedding. She would have to write him immediately, explain. She felt almost guilty at her own disappointment. But when she entered the house in Northfield there was no doubt she was entering a house where illness, even death, seemed to hover.

Her mother, holding a glass and a spoon, met her in the hallway. She looked

almost disapprovingly at Thea, as if she were an intruder from another world, a world of gaiety and color, where she had no right to be. And in her way Thea felt the same. Happiness was left in a sunny Georgia railway station.

In a sense it had always been this way with her mother. Try as she might to dispel the moods, they were stubborn and a constant fact.

Thea thought of going to her, hugging her, but the sense of disapproval was concrete.

"You stayed too long, Thea. We have been looking for you."

Thea said she had stayed only a few days longer. She wanted to show her the ring, but the strain on Astrid's face was unmistakable.

"How sick is he?" Thea asked, speaking of a man she had never met.

"He is a very ill man." Astrid went to the kitchen and placed the glass and spoon in the sink. Thea followed, feeling a stranger and in the way.

"You'll have to share your room with the nurse." Astrid said. "We have a nurse, night and day."

Thea nodded. She wanted to turn, go back, marry her lover, stay where all was healthy and young.

"We were all gathered here in the evening," Astrid was saying. "And just suddenly he fell forward in his chair. Such a lovely man. A true man of God."

And then the guilt truly struck. Thea was seeing her clothes strewn about the cabin floor. Instantly, her face reddened. It was like a flash and she saw Astrid staring at her, heavily frowning.

"Oliver was coming, but I guess he can't now."

"Oh, no." Astrid turned from her. "That would be impossible. Everything here is done for him. Lena is beside herself with worry. We can't ask her to have a guest. Not now."

Thea said she understood and turned to go to her room.

"I'm sorry," she heard her mother say.

"I understand," Thea mumbled. "What is the nurses's name?"

"Miss Brown."

Thea nodded. She and Miss Brown would be roommates. How different all this was. It was even cold and raining. No lilacs yet, just dampness with leaden skies.

"Do you want to see him?" her mother asked.

Thea looked back at her. "Should I?"

"It may be the first and last glimpse you will have of him. Such a lovely man. To think--he is worrying about us, saying how sorry he is to be trouble. Imagine, at a time like this."

How different the worlds were, Thea thought. Now, this moment, Viola Whitfield was dressed for dinner and Oliver soon would be joining her. Flowers would be everywhere--on the table, in the Drawing room. But here she was seeing only death. It was on Astrid's face, in her eyes, her forehead. She still carried the grief of her husband, dead these months, and now she was reliving all that with the kindly Bishop.

Thea went to her room to discover the trappings of another person, uniforms hanging in the closet along with a street dress and coat. A magazine lay on the table

beside the other twin bed, a glossy magazine which told of the woman's interest. Thea looked at it all and sighed. She had wanted to be alone to write Oliver. How long would it be before he could come?

And then Miss Brown entered the room.

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

The Rs in her words were deeply pronounced. Thea had become so lulled by the Southern accents that she was acutely aware of the Minnesota accent.

"I'm Thea Aaker, the daughter." She smiled at the woman, regarding her tightly permed gray hair and stiff features. She appeared to be all one color.

"Your mother told me you had arrived. I hope I won't be in your way."

Thea assured her she would not be, that just the opposite would be so. "How is Bishop Anderson?"

"He holds his own. But I think his prognosis is grave."

"I'm sorry," Thea said and turned from the woman to continue unpacking.

"Can I help you? Mrs. Anderson is with her husband just now."

Thea thanked her, but escape was all that was on her mind. She wanted to go somewhere, somewhere private so that she could gather her thoughts. Oliver would be so disappointed. She had to break the news gently. She went to the one window in the room. It was still raining outside. But she glimpsed the winding stairs that led up the hill to the college. There was a library. She would go there and write, pretend she was a student.

The next morning she settled at a long table in the library and began to write.

She wrote a long rambling letter describing the trip upward, her arrival and the situation here. She was afraid, she wrote, that her mother might decide to go back to Norway because of the situation.

*...And I will have to remain here. I say "have to" because I know a trip to Norway is out for you just now.*

She ended the letter with words expressing her love and longing, and, for now, in this grey world she meant these words more than she had ever felt before. Distance had indeed worked its magic, and her longing for Georgia and all that the state meant to her was intense. There was home. Here was foreign.

When she returned to the house, Astrid ushered Thea in to see the Bishop. He lay with only a sheet and a blanket covering him. The Nordic profile with the high forehead, thin lips and firm jaw were so Scandinavian that for a moment Thea felt she was in Kristiania again. His grey-bond hair was carefully parted and brushed. He lay still as death with only the steady rising and falling of his chest to show there was life.

As they departed the room Astrid put her arm about Thea's waist. "I see you have acquired something."

Thea looked at her questioningly. The ring! "Oh, yes." She held out her finger.

"So large, Thea."

"I know."

"But so beautiful."

Thea smiled then, because Astrid was attentive for the first time since she had returned. They went to the small library where the Bishop and Lena's books were

carefully placed in accordance with subject matter.

"I'm sorry, Thea." Astrid sat in the chair nearest the window so that Thea could easily see the strands of grey in her hair.

Thea told her that Oliver wanted to marry soon. But Astrid said that was impossible. "As you can see."

"But how long?" Thea burst forth with the question.

Astrid shrugged her shoulders. "Who knows these things?"

"I've written him not to come." Thea was examining her ring.

"Thea?" Astrid asked quietly. There was something in her voice that caused Thea instantly to look up. "You have been discreet? Haven't you?"

There was something in the question, something almost obscene that caused the anger to burst forth in Thea. "You should never ask such a question. It's---"

Astrid put two fingers to her lips. "Calm yourself."

"I don't like your prying."

"No one is prying. A mother has a right to ask such a question."

Thea rose from her chair. "I don't think so. I don't think so at all."

And she left the room, her body fairly shaking. Outside she began to walk. Her mind was in a whirl. She was thinking of Oliver now. They could marry at a small gathering somewhere. Oliver would prefer that anyway. Viola and Sarah and all of Oliver's relatives were planning to come to a wedding. She could not have that. She would write all this to Oliver. She would also write that she despised this place and the sooner they married the better. "Have you been discreet?" The anger fairly boiled

inside her.

She wrote the letter, leaving out her dislike of Minnesota and the situation here. And she waited for a letter to come in return. But all her thoughts were not of a returned letter. Fear now had entered her being. What if something had happened? What if she were pregnant? She counted days. She was overdue. But that often was the case. Still, the thought was so overpowering she felt herself actually cringing against the walls of the house. Her face broke out in red splotches--on her cheeks, forehead, chin.

As the days went on she asked herself over and over: Should she see a doctor? Was there such a doctor in Northfield? The nurse would know. Miss Brown. But then the woman would become curious, wonder why a young woman so blooming in health needed a doctor. What would Oliver say? Would he leave her as he had the girl in Charleston?

Her mind was exhausted by questions. Several times a day she felt her stomach and there seemed a heaviness about her that was not there before. Then she never thought of her body. But now there was something--- Each day she thought surely she would have a letter. Oliver promised to write immediately.

Finally he wrote: he had been waiting to hear from her so that he could make plans for the trip northward. He was sorry to hear about the Bishop but sorrier that they had to postpone their lives together. A small wedding suited him better than anything. Viola said she would give a large reception in Ashton when they were "settled . . ." He missed Thea now more than ever and he loved her more than anyone on earth.

Thea's relief was extreme. But not all the solace was there. She had to see a

doctor. Miss Brown was the answer:

"I've never had this before. My heart just seems to skip about. My father died of heart trouble . . . I don't want anyone in the house to know; they don't need more trouble . . ."

Miss Brown wrote the name of a doctor on a pad and handed the piece of paper to Thea. "I'm sure there's nothing really wrong."

Dr. Paul Knudson.

Thea stared at the name as if it were her death knell.

On the thirty-eighth day of her turbulence Thea finally made up her mind. She would see Dr. Knudson. But it was such a small town. What if she and Astrid ran into him by chance? What would he say? But Miss Brown answered her probing. Dr. Knudson, she said, was also a farmer and spent much of his time outside his medical practice away from the town.

Odd, these days. Underlining all her worries was a musical strain. She kept hearing it over and over. It was a theme from "Tristan and Isolde." Over and over. Thea often went with her father to the Opera House in Kristiania to hear the Wagnerian masterpiece. In irony now she remembered missing a question on one of the examinations at school. "What was the major theme of 'Tristan and Isolde'?" Written in her teacher's handwriting were the words: "The conflict between piety and sensuality." She had not known.

And so it was. Astrid, at one point in their lives, had taken to church going. And Thea who was usually with her had been influenced by a young handsome pastor. She



listened as he talked of married love. It was sacred, he said, and not to be entered into lightly. And certainly, one was chaste until the sacrament of marriage. Or else one suffered God's wrath. "And rightly so," proclaimed the pastor.

In her heart Thea knew this to be so. Almost a year ago now, to the day, she remembered Oliver's telling her about the girl in Charleston. Her first reaction was that they both had erred. ~~And~~ surely they would find their just due. And now this was her due. Her hell.

Her father believed in Nature. He was not a churchgoer. He believed that mankind was like the flower of the field, that no strong finger pointed its anger. They lived and they died. "For a wind passeth o'er and it is gone. . . ." How much easier to accept her father's belief than Astrid's.

Astrid's churchgoing was solace for her fierce moods, her in-laws said. "She goes to church to be cured," Thea's aunt had said one day. And Thea wondered. Something there in that plain church building appeared to soften her mother. And Thea, too. She, Thea, believed in the Son of God and that accordingly there would be an afterlife where she would join all that had gone before.

Now: was there a fiery hell? Could so kind a God send her to such a place? Merely because she loved too much. Piety and the senses. Which? Once, in her fear, she put her fist to her forehead as if by so doing she could draw all these thoughts from her mind. And the maddening music, too.

Sometimes it appeared to her as if everyone in the house were examining her, even Miss Brown, who questioned her constantly about her health. The house was

filled with eyes, she felt, especially her mother's eyes regarding her body stonily, seeing change there. For she, Thea, felt the change in her breasts, back and stomach. She felt enormous nausea in her mouth and once she vomited so long she thought surely she would throw up all that was growing inside her.

Each quickening of her pulse was the mysterious child inside. And her nights were sleepless in terror. Surely she would be made to pay for her wrong. Once she dreamed that Oliver came to her and lifted from her side a dead son. She woke weeping soundlessly. But there was only the soft snoring of Miss Brown to allay her fears.

There was always the guilt, her complete selfishness. Each morning she hoped to hear the news that the Bishop had died. And then she told herself how sorry she was. But the hope would not go away. If he died now there would be a funeral and soon after plans for a wedding would go forth.

But he would not die. Indeed, he appeared to rally and was able to sit up in his bed and take a little nourishment. But that did not last and the rising of the sheet and blanket commenced again. Life. It was with the Bishop and in her body. If only she could talk to someone, talk to Astrid, talk to Oliver.

Then: On a day when there was not a single cloud in the sky and the lilacs were at their height she walked the distance from the house to the small town offices. A river divided the commercial district of the town into two parts. Dr. Knudson's office was located across the river and on a slight hill near Carleton College, another institution that everyone said made the town of Northfield so unique.

Thea found the office. It was located in what must have been a one-time residence. "Dr. Paul Knudson" read the sign outside. Thea hesitated, not sure she wanted to enter this white frame house and hear the news that would alter her life forever. Her heart beat so that she placed her fingers to her neck as if she could soothe herself thus.

Inside the house all doors were closed except for a small parlor where an old woman and a farmer sat staring into space, sick.

She sat in one of the straight-backed chairs and later an elderly nurse with a skirt down to her ankles asked her what she wanted "to see the doctor about." The woman had almost white hair and a ruddy face that somehow spoke of kindness. But Thea said that she thought there might be something wrong with her heart.

"Oh, I doubt that," said the nurse. "Such a healthy young lady---" And then all at once she seemed to understand. The town was filled with college students. Surely there were others who had come to see the doctor, young women who were as afraid as she. Thea looked down at her hands. She was wringing a handkerchief.

The nurse patted her shoulder and disappeared.

Dr. Knudson was a man probably nearing fifty. He had a shock of blond-gray hair, blond eyebrows and blue, blue eyes. His stocky build was indeed a farmer's build — muscular with broad shoulders.

The nurse ushered Thea into his office, where there was a desk only, no examining table. Thea could scarcely swallow and she feared she would be unable to speak.

"Now, young lady, what is your real trouble?"

"Real?"

He nodded and his blue eyes were almost stern.

"I have missed my--" She could not say the word.

"Your period?"

Thea looked away.

"Is there a reason to think you might be pregnant?"

Thea looked into his eyes. They appeared to soften. And then she was crying uncontrollably. She didn't think she could stop. What have I done? Who is this horrid man? Why am I not at home?

The nurse was by her chair. "Now, now," she kept saying and patting Thea on her back.

"...the examining table." Thea half heard the doctor.

"No," Thea protested. "I must leave."

"It is all right, dear. No one will harm you," said the nurse, trying to ~~lift~~<sup>lift</sup> Thea under her arm.

Thea rose from the chair and, handkerchief to her nose, followed the nurse. Dear God, Dear God, she kept repeating to herself.

"And so---," the doctor was saying. "I must see you every three weeks at least and, if there is anything wrong, you must let me know at once."

Vaguely Thea was listening. She was seeing Astrid's face — ashen. She had

disgraced her mother, her father's memory and the entire family, who had never caused harm to anyone. She and Oliver would have to run away, marry in a clerk's office somewhere. The ugliness of it was so terrible she stared unseeing into the stern blue eyes in front of her.

"You are not married, are you?" came the question.

Thea shook her head.

"You are not the first," the doctor mumbled.

Thea said nothing. Wasn't he trying to tell her he had seen many a wanton girl who had come here in tears and terror to reveal their dreadful secret?

"And you won't be the last."

Thea looked at the face and she thought she hated the man. She narrowed her eyes and wished she could have slapped his arrogant stone face.

"Are you a religious girl?"

He was speaking to her as if she were a servant-girl.

Thea nodded.

"Then pray," said the doctor. "Pray for yourself and this unborn child."

Thea stared at him, seated across from his desk. In his nacreous face was all the judgment of Lutheran thunder. She rose from the chair, nodded to the man and left.

Oliver. Oliver. She would have to write him. Somehow she would escape Astrid. But she had no money. All she had she spent on the doctor. It was money she had left over from the trip to Georgia, and she could not ask Astrid for more.

When she returned to the house, Astrid was arranging lilacs in a tall glass vase

to go in the hallway. Thea immediately began to act---her "concerned-for-others" attitude she had faked these weeks.

"Where have you been?" Astrid asked, frowning.

"Walking. It's so lovely outside."

"We needed someone--- To make an errand."

"Oh?"

Lena wanted to borrow a bed vessel from the college infirmary. Astrid had to go and leave the scalding of utensils to Miss Brown who already had her hands full. "You must help here, Thea. You are needed."

"It's the least we can do," Astrid explained. "We don't want to be a further burden. We can help Lena now. You mustn't go running about when you're needed."

Astrid was speaking to Thea as if she were a child. Thea turned from her in fury.

"And stop those impetuous ways. You can't always have everything your way. You'll see one day."

There was no escaping. Thea went to her room in hopes Miss Brown would not be there. On the way she peeked into the sick room and saw the up down, up down of the sheet. Then it struck her, as it had before, that she could rid herself of this baby. She could fall down somewhere, lose it. But then Astrid would know.

The only answer was Oliver. But in the back of her mind was the girl from Charleston. And the more she thought about it the angrier she became with Oliver. How many more? she wondered. How many other girls had he caused to suffer in this way? But it was her fault as well. More so. And she saw God as she had seen the doctor---

judging her fiercely from the sky.

Half-crazed she found a piece of paper and wrote Oliver:

*We could find a small church in Minneapolis somewhere. It is absolutely necessary that we marry. And SOON. You will understand. Please come. Please hurry. It is all so grievous here. Sickness and fear. If you love me, you will come.*

*Thea*

She reread the letter. She was begging, and she knew Oliver well enough to know the tone would irritate him. He liked his own decisions. But he did love her. She knew that. Still, tiny doubts began to make their way into her sick mind. For sick, she believed she was. She thought of her mad aunt in Norway. And I'm just like her, she thought, crazed. What would this do to the unborn child inside her? She crumpled up the letter to Oliver and with tears streaming down her face held the mangled letter to her breast.

Miss Brown entered the room, her grey face in alarm.

"Why, Thea?" Curiosity and alarm both showed on her wrinkled brow.

Thea said nothing. She put her lace handkerchief to her nose.

"You must accept these things."

Thea, in half-shock, looked up at her, standing there in the doorway still frowning.

"Death is only natural. As a part of life as breathing."

"Oh?" It was a mere utterance.

Miss Brown seated herself in the chair opposite Thea's bed. She was tating.

"Yes, your mother showed me how. The lace is so beautiful."

So there was to be an extended visit, Thea saw. "How long?" she asked.

"The Bishop?"

"Yes."

"One never knows. He has such courage. Always thinking of others. He even blessed me. Imagine."

Thea felt the crying inside again, not for the Bishop's courage or his goodness, but for the evil inside her own soul. This was hell then, hell on earth, the way one paid for one's sins. God was righteous in his wrath. She would write Oliver again, suggest more gently for him to come. There could be no formal wedding, she might write. She would never be a bride, she would not write. She would have this baby in Ashton. Everyone would know. Or would they? She could pretend. She wished Miss Brown would quit her tatting and leave so that she could write Oliver. She watched the brown shuttle go in and out the thread, forming beautiful lace, from such an ugly instrument.

"I believe you must be in some trouble, Thea. Do you want to talk about it? I am a nurse, after all."

They both stared at one another, Miss Brown holding the tatting, and Thea wringing her handkerchief. It was over. Suddenly Thea was hugging the woman, imploring. "What can I do?" Her sobs were as uncontrollable as they were in the doctor's office and she didn't care what happened. Miss Brown, poor plain woman, was now a goddess, a helper, a saint.

"Now. Now." Miss Brown was patting Thea's back as Thea hugged the woman, not letting loose.



"We must talk, Thea."

Yes, they must talk. Thea let her grasp weaken. But then the room came back to her, the world. She could not tell this stranger what she had done.

"You are with child?"

Thea listened to the silence and gazed into the woman's eyes. Strange, she had never noticed before. The woman's eyes were orange, not hazel. Thea nodded.

"How long?"

"Over a month, longer."

"Mercy, mercy, mercy, child."

And Thea began to cry again. She was sitting on the floor at the woman's feet. "I don't know what to do," she managed.

"And your dear mother, so thoughtful, always thinking of things to do---to help me and Mrs. Anderson. She doesn't need more worry, does she?"

Thea shook her head. But she felt a twinge of resentment. The last thing she wanted to hear just now was the virtues of her mother.

"You will have to tell her."

"Why?"

"Where is the young man?"

Thea told her, adding that she was writing him, that they could have a quiet ceremony somewhere. She was babbling, watching the orange eyes narrow. Still, there was relief in the fact that someone besides herself and the doctor knew her miserable news. There was someone to release her torment.

"How long do you think the bishop will live?" Thea asked, sensing her guilt as if she willed the poor man's death as well as the grief of Mrs. Anderson.

"I don't want him to die, of course. But should he die, a wedding would not be completely impossible. In time." Her voice trailed away.

"I don't know. Sometimes patients with strokes live for years."

"For years?" Thea stared at her.

Miss Brown nodded. "But in this case I just don't know. He's taking only little nourishment." Miss Brown took up her tatting without moving the shuttle. "I do think you should tell your mother. Of course, it is not the best of times."

"She'll be furious."

"Most likely. But mothers love no matter what."

In truth, Thea did not know how her mother would react. She had never done anything seriously wrong in her life. There had been mild admonishments through her life, but neither she nor Martha had done anything outstandingly wrong. Little things, yes. But Astrid did have a temper. She had shown it on many occasions with her husband's family. They were curious people, Christian Aaker's immediate family, as well as the far family. And they were especially curious about Astrid who had ties to the royal family of Sweden. They resented Astrid. Astrid was better born than they, but they never spoke of that. They spoke only of their own connections. Astrid kept as far a distance as possible from her husband's kin. But this, pregnancy out of wedlock, had never happened in either family.

"Will your young man come here?" Miss Brown asked.

Thea nodded. "He was coming, and then all this sickness happened. We could have married in Georgia." Thea rose from the floor and sat on the side of the bed. "But Mother would have resented such a thing."

"More than this?" Surprisingly the woman was smiling, as if she had pronounced a joke.

"This is not funny, Miss Brown."

"Oh dear," said the woman. She put aside her tating and came to Thea, patting her on the shoulder again. "Of course, it isn't." Miss Brown's Ss sounded like hisses and her Rs fairly rattled. The accents of Georgia were leagues away. Thea believed she would never accustom her ears to the Minnesota way of speaking.

"I'm sorry," Thea mumbled.

"Yes. Well, why don't you lie down and rest for a while. Later, you can write your young man. You'll feel so much better."

Thea nodded.

"I must go now. Try to rest."

Thea watched her leave the room, heard the door close and then she fell on the bed, sobbing quietly. 'I'll write him. I'll write him, she was saying to herself.