

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I do so wish you could come. There is a small hotel here. Mrs. Anderson, of course, was planning for you to be here, but now, as I wrote, things are so confused. The little hotel really isn't so bad. The ceilings are high enough, even for you. I checked...

Thea paused. She was trying to make the letter read as casual as she could, answering all the questions he wrote almost daily. Mainly they were questions about the reception his mother was giving and there were numerous questions about the cabin which he was enlarging, adding two extra bedrooms and baths. In the last letter he wrote:

It's just as well circumstances turned out as they have. Our "home" is a complete mess about now and we would have to live with Mother for at least another month. I know you wouldn't mind, but it isn't my idea of beginning a new marriage with an in-law (for you).

She read no further. Another month! This could not be. By then she would be

unable to wear her clothes. The wedding would have to take place now.

"Do come," she urged. "Do please come."

She mailed the letter and waited. Miss Brown was over-solicitous, questioning her about her health, asking about her diet. She didn't appear to be eating properly, she said. Thea assured her she was all right. But she was not all right. Her mornings were almost treacherous, arising, as she did, at four o'clock some days to avoid meeting Astrid as she vomited the sickened contents of her stomach.

Astrid was becoming suspicious. At least Thea thought she saw signs.

"You look pale, dear," she said one morning. "Perhaps you should see a doctor." She asked Miss Brown if she thought Thea was ill. And Miss Brown said she had never seen a healthier young woman. Thea wanted to hug her. There was a great goodness in this grey woman as she crisply went about her nursely duties.

Finally one morning after Thea had mailed the letter to Oliver she announced to Astrid and Mrs. Anderson that Oliver Whitfield was coming to visit Northfield. He would stay at the hotel, she said, but she had not heard from him as yet.

"Oh, Thea," Astrid sighed.

"He won't be any trouble."

"I know, but we're just not up to meeting someone just now."

"All you have to do is say 'how do you do' and we'll get out of your way."

"Don't be silly."

And the subject was dropped. For the moment. Thea waited. Then Oliver wrote back:

You didn't mention the key word, "marriage." You're not trying to call this off. Are you? Inviting me to your lair and then telling me, so cordially, that you are returning to Norway alone. Say it is not so....

The tone of the letter irritated Thea, its flippancy. She had to talk to him, tell him what was happening. But she could not bring herself to write the words. Besides, she was too sick, even to write. Miss Brown insisted she see the doctor again and she frightened Thea further with the suggestion she might lose the baby.

And so again Thea made the familiar walk across the river and into the gingerbread house, where the blue fierceness of the doctor's eyes stared at her. He wanted answers concerning nourishment, diet, sleep. "Pain?" Has there been any pain?"

Thea shook her head. Only in the heart, she wanted to say. There was pain throughout her body, and the small pain about her heart, the pain of force, the force of undropped tears.

"We don't like to give medication to pregnant women," the doctor declared, emphasizing, Thea thought, the word "pregnant." Before her was a devout Lutheran, an American Lutheran whose belief in every word of the Bible came without wavering. It was a stern belief and before him sat a sinner, a lost girl from Norway, his own home country, which he idealized into something no country could possibly be: perfection without a hint of wrongdoing.

Finally, Thea left with a small bottle of brown medicine that the doctor said would lessen the nausea.

"In time," he said, "this will disappear by itself."

And so will I, thought Thea. It was the first time the word suicide entered her thoughts.

The doctor mentioned that medication was bad for a pregnant woman. Thea thought of the medicines in the bathroom that the bishop shared with his wife. The entire top of the cabinet was filled with bottles. She could kill this baby and herself with one of them.

As she walked she saw the bottles---blues and pinks and champagne---all the colors of the rainbow, waiting---and her death beyond. There would be no more tears, no more anguish, no planning, no hiding. She would be with her father again, roaming the fjords of home, happy in their language and eternal youth.

But Oliver? Astrid? Could she do this to them? Leave them? Live through it, she was saying as she walked. All you have to do is live through the days, then you will be old and die. Live through it. Live through it.

When she returned to the house Astrid was waiting in the small library. Thea instantly felt her heart beat. The doctor had called her. Astrid knew. Or Miss Brown had told her.

"What's the matter?" Thea asked, viewing Astrid's frowning face.

"A telegram." She was holding the black and white envelope. "A message for you."

"For me? What?" She took the envelope. It was not open.

Quickly she read the words:

*Mother died last night. Plans must be postponed for visit.
Letter follows.*

*Love,
Oliver.*

Thea handed the message to Astrid, saying nothing. She watched as Astrid read the two lines and re-read them. Then she collapsed the message and her hands together into her lap. "Death everywhere," she said, half-whispering as if she were talking to herself, not Thea.

But the pounding in Thea's head would not stop. She was trying to think, trying to focus her thoughts but all the while watching Astrid, praying she would not see her desperation. For desperation it was. Time. Time. No one could stop Time.

"Did you like her, Thea?" Astrid's voice was soft.

"Yes, I did. She was very dignified but she had a sense of humor and was remarkably traveled and informed. She knew Norway." Thea realized she was chatting. Nervously. But talking this way eased something in her and she began to picture Viola Whitfield---mainly she heard her voice, low and even, so unlike the voices here, and she was seeing her deep dark eyes, beautifully hurt eyes as she observed the antics of the young.

"I wish I had got to know her," Astrid said, examining the telegram again.

"I do, too. You would have. At the wedding. But now---" Her voice trailed off.

"There has to be an appropriate mourning period," Astrid said. "Your poor young man."

How long? Thea was thinking. How long? And upstairs the bishop breathed on.

Death was her enemy. Or friend? Her thoughts began to panic again. She needed to be alone.

But then Astrid, calm, sitting there frowning, gave the answer. "Are you going?"

"Going where?"

"To the funeral." She leaned forward. "Don't you think you should?"

Thea rose from the chair. "Yes! That's the answer."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean. He would come here. I know. If---"

"If something should happen to me. Don't be afraid of the word death, Thea."

Thea actually whirled round with her arms stretched out. "I'll wire him. I'll wire him I'm leaving tonight."

"I do think you should," said Astrid. "She has been so lovely to you. Welcomed you. Almost like a daughter."

Then, suddenly, Thea wanted to cry. She would miss Viola Whitfield. There was so much she wanted to learn from her, not only about Southern ways, but about her son. One thing she had learned: never cramp his freedom. So, now, what would he think? Feel? About their child. Would a child bind him too closely? But she couldn't think about that now. There was so much to do. Pack. She ran to her back room as if she had been freed.

By eight o'clock the train was moving through the Minnesota prairie for its voyage to Chicago and then South again. She had spoken to Oliver by telephone. He

was pleased she was coming. But he sounded so distant. They would delay services until she arrived, he said. Thea had forgotten the way of funerals in the South. Almost the next day the body was buried. Only Negroes waited an appropriate length, but that was mainly because of the lack of money. That was what Lucille told her once.

It was only after she was on the train that Thea began to think seriously how she would tell Oliver her news. And when she did tell him, could he marry so soon after his mother's death? But they had to marry. Soon. No matter what Astrid or anyone said.

But what would Oliver say? She asked herself the question over and over. Even the wheels of the train appeared to ask: *What would Oliver say?* She listened to the turn of the mighty wheels, and it occurred to her she most likely would never return to Minnesota. Astrid was leaving the next month or so, and there would be no reason for Thea to return. She would be in Georgia forever. The thought brought with it a distinct sense of suffocation. Would she ever see Norway again? Or her mother?

If only Oliver would come back to Minnesota for a small wedding. But he never took to other people's notions. Every decision had to be his own, *his* creation, *his* thought. Thea had seen this in him, and his mother had said the same. It was a part of his mother's character that Thea accepted begrudgingly. Yet there were so many other qualities that overruled. Dear Viola. Thea wondered what the empty house would be without her now. Sarah and Allison would not be married until October and the house would remain empty, waiting for them. Thea, with child, would go to Charleston for their wedding and observe their happy innocence.

A slight shiver ran through her body. *What will Oliver say?* Her body rocked with

the movement of the train, and the baby growing inside her seemed to have knowledge. It was as if a ghost were inside her, a god perhaps that would not, could not speak but knew somehow, knew all.

Tears began to fall down her cheeks. There were so many tears these days. For no reason at all sometimes. Just the warm crying inside, the fullness of blooming and withering, all at the same time. *What will Oliver say?*

She wiped aside the tears when the porter asked if he could make up her berth now. His dark eyes dwelled on her face, then he looked away, and then back again. Did he expect she was going to divulge some terrible truth?

"My fiancé's mother died," she said.

"Did? That show is *baad*." He stood taller. "You just go set over yonder whilst I makes up this here bed."

Thea smiled at the man. The black people were so kind. The people were kind in Minnesota, too. But they never showed their kindness. At least not in their speech. Nor did the Norwegians. Dignity was never abandoned by them. Ever.

"We gone be in Chicago fore you know it," said the porter. "You stay there?"

"No, I'm going to Georgia."

"Is? You ain't from Georgia. I knowed that right off. Where you from?"

"Norway." She smiled.

"Sho *nuff*!"

He had no idea where Norway was, Thea knew, but she appreciated the enthusiasm.

"Now you just get yourself some rest. We be changing in Chicago in the morning."

But by four o'clock the illness came. The train rocked so Thea wondered if she would be able to get to the restroom in time. She did. By minutes. The movement of the train was so fast she believed she might faint. With all her strength she held onto the doorknob as she vomited into the small receptacle. The sound of the wheels was louder in the restroom and that plus the nausea plus the fear dazed her so she felt she might fall.

"Can I help you?"

Thea turned slightly. In the blur she saw a middle-aged woman dressed in a tan sweater suit frowning at her from what Thea thought was a great distance.

"I'm very ill," Thea managed.

"Here," the woman said. She pressed a wet towel to Thea's forehead. It was a gentle touch and just the face of the woman's presence eased the fear in her. She tried to smile at the woman, a very handsome woman with auburn hair and blue eyes.

"Are you pregnant?" the woman asked.

Thea nodded.

"Oh, dear. I understand then. What a terrible place to have morning sickness. On a train. I'll stay with you."

After a while Thea found herself seated in front of the large mirror in the small room telling this perfect stranger about her entire life, her meeting Oliver, even her

pregnancy and how she had not told her mother any of this. Yet she was here on this rollicking train telling everything to this gentle woman. They even laughed once when Thea said "oops" and ran to the toilet again.

"Better?" the woman asked.

"I think so," said Thea. It was so odd. She felt she had known this woman all her life. Yet she didn't even know her name. Nor did Thea give hers.

"You'll only be sick this way for a couple of months," the woman said.

And Thea said her greatest fear now was that she might be too sick even to go to the funeral. "He doesn't know. My fiancé. I didn't want to write him."

"No. As my father said, '*never* put anything in writing.'"

Thea nodded. The woman was from Lake Forest, Illinois, and she had a daughter Thea's age. She knew nothing of Georgia or the South, which was something Thea was accustoming herself to. The vastness of America. In Norway everyone knew something about each city and town. Here there were vast sections unknown to half the population. It was like many countries. The North, East, South and West.

"How do you think your young man will take to your news?"

"I don't know," Thea said. And she recognized that for the first time she was speaking her fears aloud. "It's a disgrace, of course. A great sin what I have done."

"The word is 'we' not 'I.'"

Thea stared at the woman's features, her greying auburn hair and light blue eyes. She was indeed a pleasing-looking woman, pretty actually. Her kindness, shown somehow in the set of her mouth, begged for confession.

"You're correct, of course," Thea said.

"My daughter was a seven-months baby. Supposedly." The woman looked away.

Her own confession was so welcomed that Thea bent forward and patted the woman's hand. "Thank you. Thank you."

"I understand." They were whispering their dark secrets.

"Did anyone know? Did anyone find out?"

"I'm not sure. My mother-in-law never liked me." She gave a little laugh. "She lived and does live, it seems forever."

"How unpleasant." And then the wave of nausea came again. Thea ran to the toilet. It seemed she had nothing else inside her to vomit. She began to cry. And the woman was by her side.

"I'll never make it through the station and onto the other train."

"I'll help you. I'll go with you."

Thea straightened and threw her arms about the woman. "I have never met such kindness. Anywhere. Oh, thank you."

"You go to Dearborne Station. Don't you?"

"I think so." Thea had not examined her ticket or schedule. She was seeing her reflection in the mirror, seeing the woman's back and her own reddened face, thin and emaciated, her damp hair stuck to her head. It was not she. She released the woman and with her hands holding both sides of her head went to look closer at her sick face. How could she have come to this?

"I'm so thin," she muttered more to the mirror than to anyone. Her cheeks were

hollow and her eyes large, as if they had increased in size only in days. She ran her fingers along her long neck. Even her hands looked worn. She covered her face with her hands. "I don't know what I'm going to do."

"You're going to live. That's what you're going to do. Look at me."

Thea gazed at the woman, who was half smiling. "One day you're going to think back on this very train trip, and by then you will have forgotten the pain — most of it."

"I'll never forget you," Thea said, and she meant it.

"Oh, you will. You'll remember some funny-sounding woman from the suburbs of Chicago."

"Who was more of a friend than I've ever had."

The woman patted her and left the room with the words that she would help her onto the other train.

When Thea waved goodbye she called out one word: "Who?"

But the train was moving and the friendly face vanished into the early morning mist. She did not even have the woman's name. She would never know who it was who had given her solace when for all the world she felt she was utterly and completely alone. She stood on the moving platform seeing the mist rise from the ground as if it were rising from the earth everywhere.

At last she returned and found her berth. She was headed South and to what she had no idea. But she would never forget the woman from Chicago. The previous train was late. They narrowly met the train at Dearborne, leaving no time for exchanges

of address and Thea was too busy trying to comb her hair and put herself in some kind of order to think of names and addresses. And none was offered. Yet she felt closer to that woman than anyone, except Oliver, whom she had met in America.

Now, leaving the outskirts of the city, still in mist, she sat back and took account. The medicine she took earlier finally had worked and she actually felt like eating breakfast. There was a kind of euphoria with her now. The thoughts of Oliver and her own anguish were dissipated. For the time, at least.

Her nerves were not the excitement and high fear of the first trip South when she was afraid what Oliver's mother and friends might think of her. The time now was mostly planning. She could not, would not tell Oliver her news immediately, she decided. He would be too grieved over his mother's death, a grief she, Thea, knew all too well.

"Deliver us from sudden death," she quoted to herself from some vague scripture, perhaps in England, she was recalling now. She had not understood then, nor now, why one prayed for such deliverance. It seemed that was a wish devoutly to be welcomed — a sudden death, a quick and painless exit.

After breakfast she dozed for a while. Only then did she realize how exhausted she was. The time in Minnesota and her own fears had taken their toll and left her with this mental and bodily exhaustion. She gazed out the window at the stark Indiana fields. She actually believed she recognized some of the plain houses she saw on the last trip South. But her mind was on a train headed for Lillihammer. The lids of her eyes

were so heavy that she dozed again and dreamed of her father. He was very alive, returning from a hunt in Sweden. Oliver's mother's death must have caused the dream of association, she concurred. Astrid always made much of dreams, believing they portrayed the real self even in a prophetic way. But Thea believed none of this.

It fascinated her to watch the change of terrain. The further South the greater the spring. The dogwoods had gone by but the trees were in their newest green and wild azaleas bloomed everywhere. Most houses, even the meanest, displayed azalea bushes and, at last, she was in the lushest of the South. The lushness somehow seemed to fit with her own body, erasing the discord of the Minnesota snow. She began to long for the warmth of Oliver's arms. She needed that warmth. It would erase the blue harshness of the Lutheran doctor's eyes, judging her, finding her guilty like some modern-day Hester Preen.

That night she listened to the train wheels again, turning, turning. But she slept soundly, only once awakened to hear a child crying a few berths away and the mother quieting the cries. "Hush, hush. All is well."

And in the morning she said to herself, "all is well." They were nearing Georgia. Thea saw the familiar red dirt and knew at once where she was. Oliver. Oliver. Soon she would be with him forever. And he would protect her, keep her from all harm. Safety would be hers all the days of her life.