

**PART II**

**OF TIME AND FEAR**

## CHAPTER TWELVE

The first person Thea saw when she approached the wrought-iron gates at the Atlanta station was the Houghton's Negro driver, Edgar. Her disappointment was instant. She had expected Oliver. In no way could she believe he sent Edgar, of all people, to meet her. Obviously it was the Houghton's idea. Oliver was too busy, too occupied, too everything to drive the two hundred miles to Atlanta to meet his fiancé. Or so her imaginings rambled.

Edgar was holding his chauffeur's hat in both hands before him, his red-streaked eyes examining each person as they came through the gate. Edgar was a small man, very dark with features more Indian than Negro. His nose, almost hooked, was long and prominent. And he had thin lips, which, if one did not know, gave him the appearance of almost meanness.

When he spotted Thea he began to grin, his teeth white against the dark skin,

and with ingrained graciousness he began to bow. "How you, Miss Thea?" This here's Edgar. You 'member me?"

Thea went to him and shook his hand. "How nice to see you again, Edgar."

"Yes'm. I'm here to carry you back to Mr. Oliver. He done come down with something."

"Sick? Is Oliver sick?"

"Sho is. But it ain't nothin but sorrying. They say he got pneumonia."

Thea stared at the smiling face, so eager to deliver the news. "Pneumonia?"

"That's what they say. Miz Houghton that what she say."

"Thea looked about for her luggage. "How is Mrs. Houghton? And Lucille?"

"They been busy, both of em. Miss Lucille she gone ma'hy."

"Marry! To whom?"

Edgar bent down. "This here yo bags?" The red cap had deposited the luggage by Thea's side. She immediately gave him the tip she held in her hand and Edgar watched the transaction, fascinated.

Thea turned back to Edgar. "Who is Lucille marrying?" She knew she should have said "Miss" Lucille. Lucille was always correcting her about that. It was the polite, *Southern* way, Lucille said. But it seemed silly to Thea and she adamantly refused.

Edgar looked at the dome of the immense dark station.

"I don't rightly know," he said in an unaccustomed high voice. "It somebody that lives in Ashton. I don't rightly know."

Thea sighed inwardly. Lucille would be a permanent resident of the town, just as

she, Thea, would be. A life-long enemy. Strange, Oliver had written nothing of any of this. She looked back at Edgar and was reminded of the time he dropped a whole bowl of cherries jubilee on top of a young man's head at a dinner party the Houghton's were giving. Edgar was given to bouts of whisky drinking, white lightning, Thea was informed. But he appeared sober now and Thea hesitantly trusted him to drive.

He held open the car door for her. She had never accustomed herself to the fact that white women should sit in the back whenever there was a black driver. Drivers in Norway, of course, were all white.

"Did Mrs. Houghton ask you to meet me?" Thea asked. She found she almost had to shout the motor was so loud, also the rocky condition of the road.

Edgar half-turned, shouted back to the open sky. "Yes'm. Say she wanted to do a little favor for Miss Viola."

Thea said nothing. Suddenly a wave of nausea reached her mouth. She covered her lips with her open hand. The road was so rough. She was afraid the child within might be harmed. She closed her eyes.

"Miz Lucille gone ma'hy a banker man," announced Edgar, a strange sort of pride in his voice. "I just remembered."

"She is," Thea managed.

"Sho is."

"How nice." And then it happened. "Edgar," she half-shouted. "Stop the car."

"Ho now," Edgar shouted, braking the automobile.

"Stop the car."

Edgar turned all the way round, his eyes wide, staring. "You ailin?"

Thea fairly leaped from the car and went over to the red ditch where she vomited until she thought there was nothing left in her. "Lawzy, Lawd," was all she heard behind her. "We got to get you to a horspital."

Thea waved him away with her left hand. Besides the humiliation of her actions, the mention of a hospital almost made her choke. There would be examinations, discovery.

Finally, she stood straighter, the waves of nausea ceasing.

"You ain't gone die or nothin. Is you?" Asked Edgar.

"No. It's something I ate on the train, I think."

"Train folks don't care whether they kill you or not."

Thea turned to him then and smiled slightly. "I'm all right, I think."

"You still looks like you ailin."

Thea made her way back to the car. Her action caused Edgar to renew his energy. He hopped in behind the wheel, his head raised toward the sky. "You ready? You ready to ride?"

Thea told him that she was. She noted the rounded curve of the back of his head, which was somehow touching. They rode the distance to Ashton mainly in silence. She had no idea what thoughts were in Edgar's brain. She wondered if the thought of pregnancy entered his mind. He was married, with children. He knew about such sicknesses. Oliver, Oliver, she thought. *You and I. You and I.* She would have to tell him as soon as possible.

Oliver was indeed sick. But he was determined to go to the funeral. Sarah had arrived from Charelston only hours before Thea arrived. And Allison, more subdued than Thea had ever seen him, told her that Oliver insisted on going to the funeral.

"Where is he?"

"Out at that damn cabin of his. It's all torn up by workmen. Stubborn. Oliver's the most stubborn man ever born."

Thea turned to see Edgar bringing in her luggage. "Edgar, could you take me to see Oliver?"

"Sho can. Lawdy, everbody's sick."

"Just drive her out there, Edgar. You know where Mr. Oliver lives," said Allison, oddly staring at Thea's luggage. Did he think she had brought too much.

Thea gave Allison a little hug and turned to follow Edgar out the door. Allison looked puzzled as he stood in the hallway, watching her retreat from the house.

"Hurry, Edgar," Thea said. "You may have to wait until I see if he needs a doctor."

"Yes'm. Edgar don't like doctors neither."

Thea said nothing. They would be alone. She could tell him everything. But when they reached the cabin Oliver was worse than she imagined. He was lying unshaven in the one bedroom. The familiar bed that Thea remembered so well. Oliver tried to sit up, but Thea at once saw the difficulty he was having.

"No, now. Lie back down." She put her hand to his forehead. He was burning with fever.

"A fine howdoyou do," he mumbled.

"Have you seen a doctor?"

He nodded, and lifted his hand to indicate bottles of medicine by the side table.

The bottles of medicine reminded Thea of the dying bishop in Minnesota. She watched the sheet covering Oliver rise and sink with his breathing.

"I'm not going to die," Oliver muttered.

"No one said you were."

"The way you were looking---I read instant death."

"Oh, Oliver." She sat beside him. "I'm so sorry about your mother. No wonder you're sick."

Oliver gazed at her and said nothing.

"I'm so glad I got to know her a little."

"The funeral is tomorrow afternoon. Has Sarah come from Charleston?"

She nodded. "I didn't see her. I hurried over here." She walked over to the mantle. It was hot in the small room. "It's boiling outside."

"I was freezing. Literally freezing."

She turned to look at him.

"I would ask you to come here, but you'd better not. We don't want both of us dying. No room in the inn, so to speak."

Thea thought of the baby. She had to stay her distance because of the baby. Now. Should she tell him now?

"How did you get over here?"

"Edgar. Edgar who works for the Houghton's drove me."

"Then why don't you let him drive you back?"

Thea was startled. She stared at him.

"No. I'm not divorcing you. I just--- I think I need sleep for tomorrow. So that we can go to Minnesota and be married in full ceremony with your mother watching every step."

"Oh, Oliver." She dropped her arms to her side. Now. She had to tell him now. But he looked so tired--- And young, she thought, lying in the bed with the white sheet covering him. His pajamas were striped, grey and white. He looked so vulnerable. Thea wanted to run to him, embrace him as she would a small boy.

"I go," she said, smiling at him. "Will Velvet be here to give you lunch and dinner?"

"She said she would."

"I'll be back to see how much recovery you've made."

"I don't want you to get this. You look so thin. What are they feeding you up there?"

Thea felt the blood rush to her face and neck. But she merely smiled. "Do I look that bad? Really?"

"You look wonderful! But frail---as if this bug racing around inside me could attack you in an instant."

Thea laughed. "Bye now. *Farvel*." She added in Norwegian.

"When are you going to start teaching me Norwegian? You said you would."



"Soon." She put her two fingers to her lips. "Go to sleep now."

"I will. And dream, as I always do, of Norway and snow."

Thea softly closed the door. Edgar was outside talking to Velvet. Velvet was bending over and clapping her hands. Edgar was laughing, too. What in the world could be funny, Thea thought. Nothing.

Edgar drove her to the Whitfield house. Somehow Thea dreaded seeing Sarah and Allison. She prayed she would not get nausea. What would they think if they knew her secret? At least Viola Whitfield had gone to her grave thinking well of her future daughter-in-law. Which brought the guilt further. Unclean. A deceit. She was all of it.

The house was filled with people---women in black and men in mourning clothes---too dark for a Georgia May. Right away Thea spied Mrs. Houghton. There was a back stairway and Thea wondered if she could escape. So many strange people made her ill at ease.

"There she is! Tay-uh! You remember me?"

Thea remembered him, indeed. Mr. "Cal-hoon" from Atlanta and his wife with the high-pitched voice.

He came toward her, an ageing former football player, grinning from ear to ear. "I was just talking about you. Mah ice queen from Naw-way. It's sad 'bout Miss Viola."

"Yes." Thea lowered her eyes. Where were Allison and Sarah?

Then Mrs. Houghton came over. She was chatting nervously. She had put the book by the door, she said, referring to a white and gold book in which guests were to sign their names showing they had called. She said there were card trays also. She

had instructed the cook to put coffee and tea in the dining room. "Sarah and Allison are at the funeral home," she said sorrowfully. "Picking out the casket."

"I've been with Oliver. He's so sick," Thea said.

Mrs. Houghton's expression became more somber.

"I do thank you for Edgar. He met me at the station with no trouble at all. So nice of you."

"Dear, you're so thin. You've lost so much weight. You haven't been ill, have you?"

"Not really."

"I think she looks like a beautiful ice queen," said Mr. Calhoun. He pronounced ice "as" and Thea for a moment wanted to laugh.

"My dear, let me see your ring," said Mrs. Houghton emphasizing *ring*.

"You gone ma'hy?" said Mr. Calhoun.

"She's going to marry Oliver Whitfield," said Mrs. Houghton. "And look at her engagement ring."

"Oliver cain't be taking mah ice queen away."

"The ring is lovely," said Mrs. Houghton.

"It was Oliver's grandmother's ring."

Mrs. Calhoun joined the group, acknowledging no one but nudging her husband. "We have to go, Charlie," she said in her ghost-like, high-pitched voice. "We promised we would be on time."

Charlie looked longingly at Thea. "Boss woman say you gotta go, you gotta go."

"Yes," said Mrs. Houghton.

Mrs. Calhoun practically led him out of the room.

"Terrible people," Mrs. Houghton said.

Thea said nothing.

"When is the wedding to be?"

"I'm not sure. There's illness in Minnesota just now."

"Oh, Thea, you know Lucille is engaged." There was genuine pleasure in the woman's face as if the world and time had suddenly turned for her.

"Edgar told me. Do I know him?"

"You've met him, I'm sure. Such a fine young man."

"I'm happy for Lucille." And even Thea heard the coldness in her own voice.

"I do hope you and Lucille get over your little misunderstanding."

"Misunderstanding?" asked Thea. "I didn't know we had such."

"Oh? Here are Sarah and Allison. Excuse me, Thea. I must speak to Allison."

Instantly Sarah and Allison were surrounded by people. Thea stood alone observing the scene. Sarah was dressed in black and she had cut her hair in the new flapper style with bangs. She looked very slender and chic with her auburn hair and slanted blue eyes. Sarah's eyes were her most attractive feature. Her eyes and brows slanted upward giving a tilt to her face. She and Allison were a most attractive couple, Thea observed, discovering herself smiling as she watched Sarah. Her future sister-in-law was very well liked. The entire group stood about her smiling as if the occasion

warranted this.

Thea left the room and went up the back stairs to her old room. Her luggage was deposited there by someone, possibly Edgar. She knew she should be downstairs but she wanted to examine her figure, see if what Oliver said was true about her frailty. She stood before the long mirror and yes, she was thin, too thin, and her face was pale. For a moment she wanted to throw herself down on the bed and sob. Everything was so terrible and death clung to the house, even this room. She had to tell Oliver. This afternoon, she said to herself. I'll go over there this afternoon and tell him.

But that was not to be. Sarah asked if she could greet people. She and Allison had to go by the newspaper and give an obituary. Oliver had called Allison about that.

"Would you mind?" Sarah asked. "We have to see the rector, too."

"Not at all," Thea said, feeling a sinking sensation as if she were drowning in death and strangers.

"Hey, don't they feed you in Minnesota?" Sarah asked. "You look so thin. And I hate you for it, too. I've gained ten pounds."

"Oh, Sarah," Thea said, admiring Sarah's lovely figure. Her blue eyes shone with innocence.

And so the afternoon went. Thea stood talking to the citizens of Ashton, Georgia, asking them to sign the funeral book, a rite she did not understand. What would they do with all the names? Read them and mark those who did not come to call? But she was so terribly tired, answering all the questions. Yes, she and Oliver were to be married. He was very sick, she said, but he planned to be at the funeral.... Yes, Viola Whitfield

had a bad heart. She had suffered one heart attack a few years ago. "We shall miss her so much." And the smiles as the people listened to Thea's broken English.

Dinner was not until eight-thirty that night when the last caller had disappeared. Allison was drinking bourbon and Sarah, wine. Thea refused everything. She was feeling slightly ill, was her explanation. But, in truth, she had the defined notion that Sarah knew about her condition. There was nothing she said particularly. It was what was not said. Sarah was usually so talkative and enthusiastic about everything. Now she was oddly quiet, and Thea caught her staring at her at times. Maybe it was because of the death in the house. Maybe.

"And just think, I'll have to live in this house all by myself until my bride joins me," Allison said. "I'm going to feel like a freak."

"Why doesn't Oliver join you?"

"Or Cuthbert?" said Sarah. "Isn't he coming?"

"He's still in China. Poor guy. And Oliver want<sup>to</sup> live over there like a sharecropper."

"Sharecropper?" asked Thea. "What is this?"

"Lazy, good-for-nothing people, the curse of the South."

Thea could never tell whether Allison was teasing or not. But she resented his words, even if he thought they were amusing.

He poured another drink. "What are we going to do with all that food people brought over?"

"I don't know," said Sarah. "But, Thea, did you mark down what people brought?"

We'll have to thank them."

Thea had not. She merely brought the food to the kitchen where Leuvonía, the elderly black servant, handled it. She shook her head slowly. "I didn't know what to do. No one brings food in Norway."

"That's all right," Allison said. "We can just write to thank 'for everything'. Good enough."

Thea looked from Allison to Sarah. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"We'll tell Leuvonía to take it home."

The thought of the food, eating funeral food, caused the nausea to return to Thea in full force. She left the room, saying she was going to give Oliver a call.

But Sarah soon came to her room. Thea was lying on the tester bed, her hand to her forehead.

"You *are* sick," Sarah said, staring down at Thea.

The brazen intrusion on her privacy jolted Thea and tears filled her eyes. She was more irritated than ill now. The nausea had quieted. It was just that she was so tired, ~~more tired than she had ever been in her life.~~

"What is it, Thea?" Sarah asked softly. "Shall I leave?"

"Oh, no. No. No. The trip, I guess. I'm so terribly tired."

At noon the next day Oliver came to the house. "All well again," he said.

Thea stared at him. She did not want to be near him in case she and the baby might catch his illness. His eyes were red and his face paler than she had ever seen it.

He cocked his head. "I'm well," he said.

Allison came into the Drawing Room. "Not well enough to avoid a bit of bourbon, I hope."

"Oh, no. I can handle that now. Yesterday I couldn't look at it."

He kept looking quizzically at Thea as he spoke. "*Prosit,*" he said as Allison handed him a glass filled with the dark liquid. There was so much drinking in the South, Thea observed. Among the men. The women she knew drank nothing, not even wine. But Oliver was more abstemious than some. Allison, she noted, liked his bourbon very much.

They were good looking brothers, Thea saw. Oliver, though, looked so thin in his dark suit. He, too, had lost weight. When would they ever be alone? There were cousins coming from here and there---from Maryland, Atlanta, Charleston. The only family member missing was Cuthbert.

There was a picture on the piano of Cuthbert. He was the most handsome of the three brothers. He looked nothing like Oliver. He had hooded blue eyes, even features and very dark hair. He was almost glamorous in his looks. The embassy in Washington had contacted him in China, also the Associated Press. There was no way he could be present for his mother's funeral.

Leuvonia's daughters and Velvet were busy making up beds and dusting in preparation for the various relatives. They almost looked happy as they went about their way in black and white uniforms and aprons, perky caps on their darkly waved hair. Thea actually heard a burst of laughter from the kitchen and clappings of hands.

Only Leuvonía seemed to exhibit sorrow for her fallen mistress.

Sarah came down the stairs dressed in a black suit with a white camelia at the corner of her collar. Her skirt was quite short and Thea felt almost dowdy in her longer skirt and plain blouse. But she did wear the *solia* pin her grandmother had given her years ago. It was very Norse with little gold and silver pendants shimmering against her suit. Sarah admired it.

"They have so many lovely things in Norway," she said.

~~[[ Talk! ]]~~

"~~Thank~~," Thea said without thinking.

"Does that mean 'thank you?'"

Thea nodded.

"You've got to teach me. I've got to learn to speak Norwegian."

"You've got to learn to speak English first," <sup>Allison</sup>~~Allison~~ said. And Oliver joined him in laughter.

"Norwegian with a Charleston accent!" Allison said. "Who ever heard of that?"

Thea was still smiling her forced smile. In truth she wanted to cry. Why did these people laugh and joke going to their mother's funeral? She didn't understand. And she was tired of always smiling when she was with Oliver's family when smiling was the last thing on earth she felt like doing.

The relatives began to arrive, most of them in a much more somber mood than Viola's sons. All the men took drinks, Thea noted. Even some of the women. Strangers. Strangers everywhere. But Oliver stayed by her side, introducing her to the various men and women.



"Engaged!" said one of the women whose cheeks were marked with round red circles of rouge. "Why, Oliver Whitfield. Who ever heard of such a thing?"

"Well, I for one," said Oliver. "And one other that I know of."

"Sarcastic. You've always been sarcastic, you devil." She blinked her eyes and her mouth teased.

"And you're from Now-way?" She asked.

"Yes," said Thea.

"Way over there?"

It was tiresome and Thea excused herself. In the dining room she was served a cup of coffee. Oliver immediately came to her.

"I'm sorry. She's my least favorite cousin. From Tennessee."

Thea looked up at him and smiled, saying nothing.

"Are you all right?"

Thea placed her cup back on the saucer. "Yes. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know. You're just not yourself somehow, sort of removed from everything."

"I have to talk to you, Oliver. We have to talk."

"If you're going to tell me it's all over I'm not going to have that talk. Ever."

"It's nothing like that. Really."

Lucille was standing in front of them. "I'm so sorry, Oliver. I just loved your mother."

She ignored Thea, but Thea observed Lucille. She had changed. Her hair also

was cut short and she had lost weight, making her look older somehow. But her dark eyes still held the lushness of youth and her general effervescence had not changed. She was not sorry Viola Whitfield had died, Thea saw. She was too breathy with her feigned sorrow.

"Well, hi," she finally said, recognizing Thea. "You've come back."

"Yes," said Thea.

"Well, I'll be seeing you," she said to Oliver, giving him a little pat on the shoulder. She looked back once.

"We were such good friends in England," Thea said.

"Well, it doesn't look as if you are now."

"No," Thea said, thinking she would have to live here the rest of her days, grow old with an enemy, a gossiping lightweight of a woman. And what would she do now if she knew Thea's secret? The thought was chilling and she said, "Oh!" and placed her coffee cup on the table.

The funeral was at St. Mark's Episcopal Church. The small building rested in a grove of dogwood and oak trees. Built by English workmen, the church was one of the more beautiful Thea had seen. The inside was brass and cedar and far down the red carpeted center aisle, in front of the steps leading to the altar, rested Viola Whitfield's coffin. Thea glimpsed it and was so taken aback she caught her breath. Topping the wooden coffin were hundreds of lilies of the valley. Greenery weaved in and out of the small white blooms as if one visioned a field of the bell-shaped flowers. It was Norway

itself. And Thea felt the strong sense of her happy young days, everything, lost days, Viola Whitfield.

She walked with Oliver as the family made their way down the center aisle and into the first rows of pews. The family was so large that they took up the first half of the right aisle. And then the crucifer and the choir followed as the rector mourned the familiar funeral rite. But all Thea could hear were the words “. . .hath but a short time to live.” She thought of Viola Whitfield, old, living the days in lonely yearning for something even she probably never knew exactly what.

Oliver watched it all, listening with intense interest as the rector read the service from the Book of Common Prayer. He did not sing or chant but held the hymnal for Thea. It seemed to Thea that Oliver's entire body sighed with the weight of loss. There were no tears. Anywhere. There had been no tears when her father died either. They would come later, Thea knew. This was pageantry. Life followed this. Alone.

Viola Whitfield was buried in the Whitfield plot. Thea glimpsed the angels and statues and harps all about them. This was where she, too, would be buried. Viola Whitfield would have liked to have been buried in Maryland, but she was here. Just as Thea would be amongst all the statuary that she despised.

When they were leaving the burial ground, Thea picked one of the lilies-of-the-valley. She would keep it forever, pressed, as a reminder of this May day when all was in bloom and the sky was cloudless and no one shed a tear for a woman who had borne them and lived solitarily in her innermost being all the days of her life.