

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Thea stood before the pier mirror in her room and examined her body. Turning sideways, she instantly put her hand to her mouth. She was showing! Not much, but she herself saw a definite change. Her waist was disappearing, the waist she had always been told was so flatteringly small. Her suit jacket covered some of the gain. Therefore, she decided, people in the church probably noticed nothing.

She sat forward in the rocking chair and put her hands to her face. It was then the thought came again: Suicide. Downstairs the Whitfields had a gun room in which weapons of all sorts were displayed. Thea had <sup>no</sup> ~~to~~ real interest in the room, but Allison told her that several of the pistols were loaded and had been ever since the family experienced a burglary a few years ago. The burglars were unable to steal the weapons because of the glass cabinets. Allison believed the culprit to be Leuvonia's grandsons. Leuvonia knew where the keys were hidden and probably told the boys

about the weapons, not mentioning the keys.

Thea had not seen Viola Whitfield in death. The casket was closed, but she had the sense of completion and that all pain had vanished for the woman. In a way Thea, especially now, envied her. It was all over and the same could be for her, too. She did not want this unknown baby and she was not sure of Oliver even. In church she felt his sorrow, but sorrow distanced him. He seemed as far away as if he had left her. And, after the funeral, he wanted to be alone. Obviously he did not want to see Thea. She was in his way. His sorrow was lonely and could never be shared. Would it be that way throughout life? Never to share anything, not sorrow, not joy, not anything?

The walls of the room seemed to tumble onto her like life itself. Could she put an end to all this? Kill not one person but two? She pressed her hand to her stomach. *Lillan*, she said in Norwegian and suddenly the walls lifted and a sweetness, the like of which she had never known, entered her being. She had to live so that no harm would come to the little one, the *lillan*. Tomorrow, she said, I'll tell Oliver tomorrow. And the calmness with which she took the resolve surprised her. The decision was made.

The next day Oliver joined the three of them, Allison, Sarah and herself, for breakfast. Thea barely touched any food, but she listened to the bantering back and forth between Allison and Oliver as if there were no yesterday, as if they had never buried their mother. Men, Thea thought. They led such secret lives. How different when her own father died. Yet here were these two brothers — joking about some childhood incident that entertained them years ago.

Sarah already had her luggage in the hall and was dressed for traveling. She laughed and smiled at all the breakfast banter. And Thea wanted to join in. She saw Oliver glancing her way as if he were inviting her, urging her to join the threesome, be a part of it all. When Sarah and Allison left, Thea decided, she would tell Oliver. But seeing him now, so carefree really, his health and color returned, her resolve was beginning to weaken. And then he pushed his chair from the table and stood.

"I depart," he said. "For more serious endeavors. Sarah, I'll see you soon."

Sarah smiled up at him. "Sooner than you think. We may push the wedding a little closer."

Thea, not thinking, said aloud. "Oh!"

And the sound was so much like a plea that the three stared at her, examining her face peculiarly.

"That is so nice," she said by way of apology.

"Are you sure?" asked Allison. "You sounded almost angry."

"Angry?"

Oliver's eyes did not leave her.

"When?" She turned to Sarah.

"Maybe June." She gave a little laugh. "I always swore I would never be a June bride."

Thea was counting the months. Two and a half months. By then she would be---

"Well, I've still got work to do." And Oliver left the table, saying nothing to Thea.

Thea looked after him. Was he angry? Hurt? What had she done? She tried to be nice

to all his relatives. She had done all she could possibly think of. And now. She would be alone in this empty house. She would be Viola Whitfield resurrected, wondering, yearning for something. All day. And then what? Perhaps she would make plans to return to Minnesota. Perhaps everyone expected that, wondering why she had said nothing about her plans or departure.

And Oliver? Did he appear like a man in love? He did not. Had she lost him? Had he lost her? The wild doubts and charges swam in her head as she hugged Sarah goodbye and smiled at Allison, saying she would see him later, she hoped.

Then she reentered the silent house. With nothing to do she found herself wandering from room to room, touching pieces of furniture, then entering the next vast room. How could Viola Whitfield have lived here alone? But so much of her was in the house. It was as if the various pieces of furniture were people, lost relatives, friends who had once been entertained here. Where were they now? There! The high Chippendale chair in the library was Mr. Whitfield. His portrait hung above the fireplace. Thea stared at it. There was something of Oliver in the face, a strength, but the father was more handsome than the son. More dignified. Or did the artist see it that way?

“Lawd, Miss Viola looked at that pitcher ever morning.”

Thea turned. It was Leuvonía, the only one who showed tears at the funeral. But Thea was so happy to see her she almost hugged her.

“I’m so happy you’re here. It’s so quiet.”

“Chile, is you gettin yo’self a baby?” Leuvonía was staring at Thea’s stomach.

At once Thea felt the blush cover her face and neck. "What do you mean?"

"You sho has commenced to getcha yourself bigger round here." She pointed to her own waist. Then a wide smile appeared on the dark face as if she had found the answer to the riddle.

The smile angered Thea. Everything was in the smile--- surprise, coyness, meanness. Or was she imagining?

"It's gone be an old *boy*," Leuvonía said, obviously seeing nothing in Thea's face of resentment.

Thea began to move about the room. "Whatever are you talking about?" She tried holding in her stomach. Before she thought there was no reason to do so. She thought Leuvonía had left for the day.

'Yes'm, an old boy." She was actually grinning. "You carryin it high up."

All the hurt and fear and want of the last weeks finally came forth to Thea and she could not hold the tears back.

"Havin chirrun ain't nothin to cry about. Look at Leuvonía, I got seven and I thanks God ever day for ever one of em."

"Where is your husband?" Thea asked. She just thought she would ask that.

"Lawd knows. Up the road somewhere. Sorry thang."

Was there no shame in the black race for having children out of wedlock? Thea knew nothing of the manners and customs of Leuvonía's race. Especially here in America. Africa was another situation all together. Many Norwegians visited Africa and they came to be very friendly with the people there. Actually, she had a relative living in

Nairobi. Her cousin Margret.

"Mr. Oliver know about this here? He ain't said nothin."

Again the anger rose in Thea's body. Her heart was racing. Surely Leuvonia never talked to Viola Whitfield in such an intimate way.

"Know what?" Thea barely could speak.

"You gettin a chile? Lawd. I was here when Mr. Oliver was born. Now he gone be a papa." High laughter.

Thea sat on the red leather sofa. "Here, Leuvonia," she said patting the space beside her. "Please sit down for a moment."

Leuvonia stared at her with red-threaded yellowed eyes.

"Come."

Leuvonia almost reluctantly sat. She folded her arms under her breasts and stared upward at the portrait of Mr. Whitfield, not at Thea.

"Look, Leuvonia. Listen to me." Thea was almost begging.

"I'm lookin." Her view was still straightforward.

"You mustn't say anything to anyone about---about my situation. Not even Mr. Oliver. I don't want anyone to know."

Leuvonia regarded her with open mouth. "Hush yo mouth, gull."

"No, no one."

Leuvonia placed her flat hand on the space between them. "Chile, I ain't even thinkin 'bout no baby. What I sees in this house Leuvonia don't tell nobody. Never has. Miss Viola she sometimes tells me thangs and asks me 'now, Leuvonia, don't you go

tellin such!' And I ain't ever told nobody and I ain't goin to neither."

Gradually an odd sense of freedom came to Thea. A relief. The fact that somebody knew, somebody she could talk to, was so releasing that she sat forward, her burden easing. Some of it anyway. It was like talking to the nurse in Minnesota. She, too, had helped as well as the lady on the train. Strangers all.

"How come you don't tell Mr. Oliver? He the daddy." And then a look of utter surprise came over the black face. "Ain't he? Ain't he the daddy? Lawd mercy, chile. What you been doin?" And then, oddly, she began to clap her hands and moan.

Thea studied this display, something she had never witnessed in another human being: Joy and sorrow exhibited openly together, clapping and moaning. In some instinctive way Thea felt she could not talk with Leuvonia's race as she could her own. They were different in their culture. But the kindness she understood and could react to. Still, what kind of a woman did Leuvonia think she, Thea, was? Wanton? Without morals?

"How could it be anyone else?" she asked, studying Leuvonia's face which had quieted now. She was a study in dark stone.

Then for the first time Leuvonia looked at Thea straight in the eye. "I knowed it weren't nobody but Mr. Oliver. But he knowed better, been raised up, even as a knee baby, he knows he weren't doing right."

"Nor was I," Thea said. Then she bent closer to the pouting woman. "We were so much--- We are so much in love, Leuvonia." But for some reason her words sounded hollow, even to her. Her main emotion now was for herself, for this baby, and the future.

She had forgotten love.

"Yes'm," said Leuvonía, as if her agreement were by rote, a custom. She had agreed with the white race all her life, never contradicting, always agreeing. Thea felt this, too. As it was with her own self, Leuvonía also was bound by custom, the temper of these mean times. But because of it or in spite of all of it, Thea believed her, believed she would keep her secret. She patted the fat arm of the woman and rose from the sofa.

Leuvonía slowly rose, as well. "Now don't you go fretting bout this here. You ain't the first woman to brang a baby fore its time."

"No," Thea said, glancing at the portrait of Mr. Whitfield again. He looked so stern, as if he were judging.

Thea was restless. The afternoon seemed to yawn into its silence. Leuvonía had gone for the day. Thea inspected the library of books, but she was unable to concentrate. There was too much else on her mind. Now that Leuvonía knew the situation, it was absolutely essential she tell Oliver. She was thinking that when she saw his car drive up in front of the house. She ran to the front door and once outside began to wave. He was carrying newspapers and a book, whose title Thea read as he got closer: "The Economic Consequences of the Peace" by John Maynard Keynes.

Thea felt almost annoyed, as if the book would occupy all of his thought when he should be thinking only about their future. Men are never fully occupied with love as women are, Thea was beginning to believe. Was it possible that only women truly loved?



"Why these moods, Thea?" Oliver asked, studying her as if he were discovering something. Once inside, he placed the newspapers and the book on the hall table.

"Have you been lonely?"

"Not at all." She heard the unaccustomed high notes in her voice.

He was smiling his half smile.

"I see you've got something to keep you busy," Thea said.

"What?"

"The book."

Oliver looked at the table. "Oh, yes. Keynes. I'm anxious to read this.

Economics. Keynes is my man."

"I see."

Oliver paused as they entered the library. "Is the house too big for one poor Norwegian lady?"

Poor Norwegian lady, indeed! Pride was another of Thea's faults. At least, both Astrid and her father told her. Over and over. It is the book, she thought. Here I am worrying myself to death and he's thinking about reading a book!

"Have I said something? Done something? You're---"

"No..." She could not continue. "Oliver."

"What is it?"

He was standing by the library globe and it was turning on its stand. Why? Why was the world turning? She could say nothing.

"Come," he said. "Let's sit down." He was extending his hand toward the red

leather sofa, the same sofa where Leuvonía and she, just hours ago, had had their talk.

Thea sat beside him.

"Now. What is all this? Are you so unhappy here?"

Thea shook her head.

"I know it hasn't been easy---with the funeral, this house. I'm sorry."

"It isn't that. Not at all. I'm so sorry for all of you." She looked at him. "Truly, I am."

He put his arm around her, but she moved away. "Something is wrong," he said.

"Definitely. What is it?"

She stood then before the fireplace, facing him. "Oliver, I am with child." She stared at him, nodding for some reason. "Yes. It's so." And she covered her face with both hands. "I'm so sorry. I am. Your mother dead. I'm so sorry." Her face was streaked with tears. "It's just like the girl in Charleston." She was shaking her head.

And now it was over. Finally. She looked at him. He was sitting forward like a gangling boy with his hands folded between his knees, staring at her, as if he could not move his gaze. He was in shock. Or was it anger? The pupils of his eyes were so dark it made his eyes seem black.

"How long?" he asked finally.

Thea asked him what he meant.

"How long have you been going through this?"

"Shortly after I left you. In Minnesota. I went to a doctor alone."

"Alone," he repeated.

Thea knew she was frowning, but she nodded expectantly.

And then he rose and, saying nothing, put his arms about her. He was whispering into her hair. "Death and birth. The everlasting cycle. Always."

She looked into his eyes, saying nothing.

"I'm so sorry, sorrier than I've ever been about anything."

"It wasn't all your fault, you know."

"Yes. I think it was."

"No." She was sobbing in his arms.

"I'm very happy," he said into her hair again.

"Oh, Oliver." And she saw tears in his reddened eyes.

They stood before the Justice of the Peace in the sooty Atlanta courthouse. Before her was her own passport, Norwegian. It lay there on the counter like her past. She was thinking of Martha's wedding---the little Stav church and all the bridesmaids wearing wreaths in their hair.... And afterward, outside the church, the friends and cousins like a rainbow of color laughing and talking on the green sloping lawn. So lovely. In May. With baskets and baskets of lilies-of-the-valley.

And now somewhere her mother's voice: "Thea, how could you?"

"We just decided."

Astrid knew. The nurse told her. Thea had disgraced the family. Astrid said as much over the telephone. It was final: Thea would never see Norway again. Somehow this mammoth dirty Courthouse signified her new life. She would be an American

citizen. Live in Ashton, Georgia, for the rest of her days. But Oliver was so kind, so loving. He tried to talk to Astrid himself, seeing Thea's distraught grief. Astrid hung up the telephone, would not even listen to Oliver's voice. Thea wept until she thought there were no more tears in the world. Never to see her mother again. Never. Or see her home, or her friends or anybody. In the midst of her ordeal Oliver said that they should marry. "Now."

So here they were.

"I will," said Thea, regarding the Probate Judge, his sallow face, rimmed glasses, asking her if she promised to love and obey Oliver, through sickness and in health.

"Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Whitfield," the judge said, revealing a black tooth in the back of his mouth.

"Thank you," Oliver replied.

"*Ja. Takk,*" muttered Thea, looking up at Oliver and meeting his smile.

It was all over.