

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Each day Thea went to the mail box to see if there was a letter from Astrid or Martha. Each day there was nothing. Thea wondered if Astrid had returned to Norway. The silence was almost unbearable, the silence and the heat that had descended on Southeast Georgia. Somehow Thea equated her mother's silence with the heat...^{as} if it, the heat, were a curse from her Nordic mother.

But she was loathe to complain. Oliver was so weighed down with worries about the newspaper. The price of paper had gone up and there were daily complaints concerning the liberal slant the paper took. At least twice monthly Oliver wrote of the plight of the Negro race, asking for better schools, better jobs. Sometimes Thea and he would receive angry telephone calls late in the night, and there were threats of cross burnings.

Oliver had to let his managing editor go. There was not the money to keep him

and, besides, he thought he could do a better job himself. Indeed, Thea thought the paper was better with Oliver at the helm of the newsroom. Still, with all the threats, Oliver was well liked. By almost everybody, except the "loon fringe," as he expressed it. He belonged to everything: the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, professional groups, all. Therefore, Thea was alone much of the time, as Viola Whitfield had warned her. Rarely was there a night without Oliver's leaving the house for a meeting.

Thea also continued having difficulties making friends. Never in her entire life had she been so alone this way. She wondered to herself, and out loud to Oliver, if Lucille were making these difficulties for her. At parties she was mainly surrounded by men, Oliver's friends. The young women her age stayed mostly to themselves, watching.

And now as June came into their lives there was the extra concern of Sarah and her wedding. She would have to tell Sarah she was unable to be in the wedding. No longer could she wear the heavy corsets which hid her blossoming figure. She would have to tell Sarah she was pregnant.

Oliver suggested writing. And that was what she did:

....have just discovered I am pregnant. And though I wouldn't disgrace you by my showing---a pregnant matron-of-honor---I really show very little. But I have been so ill. Every day, it seems. And there is nothing for it. However, dear Sarah, both Oliver and I plan to be at St. Philip's when you and Allison begin your lives together. I know you will be as happy as Oliver and I.

Please express my regrets to your mother for being so late with this news. It was only recently that we discovered this ourselves. With all your friends, there must be many to take

my place.

She signed the letter "*Much love, Thea.*" But on re-reading the letter the thoughts wore heavily: Lies. Lies. Lies. Would she ever recover from them? In church she prayed for forgiveness. But she fully believed her pleas went unheard. Her will to believe in all the church stood for was faint if altogether non-existent. She believed she was like her father in this. Nature was his god and now perhaps hers.

In mid-June Thea and Oliver drove to Charleston in Thea's new car. The low country was hotter even than Georgia and the heaviness of the weather weighed down on Thea like the child she carried. She and Oliver were to stay on the Battery with Sarah's aunt. So, as they drove along the water, Thea's spirits rose. Charleston was at its best. Thea immediately fancied the water, the moss ^{hung}~~covered~~ trees and the antique houses throughout the city. She sensed England and her delight was instant.

Sarah's aunt was Aunt Pett. She was older than Viola Whitfield and appeared to knit constantly, ~~long white~~ cloths, which Thea had no idea for what purpose they were to be used. Still, she liked the woman with her white pompadour and black eyebrows. Her eyes were steel-grey, greyer than Thea's. And she spoke in an accent Thea had difficulty understanding. Nevertheless, she exuded charm that was readily understandable.

Thea and Oliver had a bedroom overlooking the Battery and Oliver pointed out Fort Sumter, where the beginning of the war was sounded all over the world.

"Except for Norway," Thea said.

"Why not?"

"I just don't believe anyone there ever heard it."

That night Aunt Pett and her daughter entertained for Sarah. Little tables were placed throughout the garden in the rear of the house, and candles and fireflies flickered in the soft ocean breeze. Musicians played familiar strains and Thea was entirely captivated. How could Sarah leave all this for Ashton, Georgia? In this, Thea thought, she and Sarah had a great deal in common---her own longing for Norway and perhaps Sarah's longing for the beauty of her home city. The sea. Perhaps that was what they actually missed. *La mer*.

Sarah was stunned by Thea's pregnancy. Thea saw this at once. Sarah looked at Thea as she might a blue sky---with awe and wonder and some puzzlement. It was a serene regard, which Sarah rarely exhibited. Yet in the face were questions, disturbed ones. Thea saw all this and a certain desperation seized her. In no way did she want to disappoint this lovely girl whose friendship she wanted and must have through the coming months and even years.

"I hope this doesn't happen to you," said Thea when they went out alone to the back gallery. "It's nicer to have some time free of responsibility."

Sarah looked away. Thea was thinking how Sarah belonged in this city, this garden that bloomed now with June's fullness.

"But I'm happy," Thea said.

"Are you?" Sarah asked and it was then she looked at Thea with both wonder and puzzlement.

"Yes," said Thea in Norwegian. She forced a smile.

Sarah then patted her shoulder. "Then that's all that matters." She gave a short laugh. "Everyone wants to know who you are. I tell them you're my new sister."

"And so I am." Thea tried to sound casual. Some day she would tell her the truth, what she had been through, about Astrid and Martha. Perhaps this smiling Charleston girl would take the place of her own Martha, whom she so dearly missed.

For a while Thea dismissed her worries and drank in the charm of Charleston. For that was what the city was, a true delight. The people were warm and polite yet had dignity, a mixture missing in many Americans. Here, it seemed a way of being.

The wedding was held at St. Philip's Episcopal Church. The church was old (by American standards) and historic. But what Thea liked best about it was its almost startling simplicity. She was ushered to the front pews, marked by small bouquets of green and white summer lilies. Once seated, Thea looked further at the lovely lines of the church and listened to the Bach compositions rendered by the organist. All of it was the way a wedding should be and Thea found herself comparing her own wedding to this. She wondered if hers and Sarah's lives would always be so, Sarah winning and Thea losing. Certainly their weddings were just that. This was so lovely, correct and innocent. In contrast her own wedding had soiled edges, the hint of loss.

Oliver was with Allison since he was to be Best Man, a term Thea had never heard before and thought it rather amusing.

"If Allison doesn't calm down," Oliver told her earlier, "I don't think there'll be a

wedding. He's nervous enough to fall flat on his face."

"Not from drinking, I hope," said Thea and regretted it.'

Oliver frowned. "He hasn't had a thing to drink."

"I know," Thea said by way of apology. "You both will be so handsome."

Aunt Pett was ushered to the pew and Thea moved over so that this charming woman would have a clear view. She was dressed in lavender lace and about her neck was a delicate diamond necklace worn only, Thea believed, for an occasion such as this.

But the bride Sarah! Thea had seen Sarah in moments when she was more beautiful than now. French lace fell from the cap atop her head hiding much of her hair. But as she neared the altar her face lightened and the two brothers smiled back seemingly in appreciation of one of earth's comeliest creatures.

All of this was carried through in utmost dignity without sentimentality, as, Thea thought, it could have been. The dresses, the flowers, the music, all, could have amounted to effusiveness. The rector, a tall slender man with gentle bearing, read the Sacrament of Marriage. And Thea listened to the vows and compared them to her own. Yes, she would do all that the Book of Common Prayer asked of her. She watched Oliver and pride in her husband fairly shone within her. Aunt Pett, somehow sensitive to Thea's feelings, patted her gently on the hand. This is my family now, Thea said to herself.

Allison and Sarah would spend their wedding trip aboard ship. It was a passenger ship sailing to Puerto Rico and points South. In this, Thea felt envy. She, too, would have liked a wedding trip such as this. But it was not to be. Oliver said "one day." One day they, too, would take such a trip.

The wedding party stood on the Charleston docks to see Sarah and Allison off on their voyage. Sarah, a melee of confetti, laughter and high happiness, bid each person good-bye and at last the two stood on the ship's deck waving to all below. It was an unforgettable scene and Thea was to remember it again and again but for different reasons.

Standing there on the homely docks Thea suddenly was seized with such pain she thought she might fall. She grabbed Oliver's waving hand. And he immediately looked down at her.

"I'm---" She could not speak.

She could see Oliver's face, ashen, as he guided her to the car. She held on to him limping. The pain was so fierce she thought she would faint.

"Oh, Oliver," she said as he, half-lifting her, saw to it that she was seated. He ran to the driver's side.

"The ba---" Thea attempted, but there was only darkness.

She awakened and all she saw was a green shade on a window in front of her. The shade seemed to come in waves. Indeed the whole room was waves and standing near her was a frowning Oliver, sometimes close, sometimes far. Was she dead? She

looked up at Oliver again.

"You're in the hospital," he said in a hoarse voice.

Slowly it came to Thea. She was in a bed. She attempted to sit up. "Did I lose the baby?"

"No," said Oliver. "But you must be very quiet now. Try to sleep again."

Thea felt two large tears run down her cheeks. This poor baby, she thought. It has gone through so much. Would its life ever know happy days?

"Try to sleep," said another voice. And then Thea recognized the voice. Aunt Pett. In a haze she wondered if Oliver or the doctor had told how many months she was pregnant. She told Sarah she had just discovered her condition.

"Sleep," said Oliver.

And she dozed off, dreaming of Astrid skiing in mid-winter at Holmenkolen. She was happy, happy, happy, smiling in the packed snow.

Again, it was decided. Thea could travel to Ashton, but bed rest would have to be the rule throughout her pregnancy.

"Since you are well into your second trimester I think there is every reason for you to deliver a healthy child." said the doctor in his heavily accented Charleston dialect. "That is, if you get plenty of rest. With no stress or worry," he added.

Worry and stress are my first cousins, Thea was thinking. That was all there was in her life now. Her main worry was that people in Ashton would hear of her mishap.

Indeed, they did not need to hear. There were many from Ashton at the wedding itself.

"But they don't have to know how many months," Oliver said. "You could have just found out you were pregnant. All legal. You're a married woman. You're Mrs. Oliver Whitfield."

"I am Thea Whitfield," Thea muttered, hearing the odd name. She still thought of herself as Thea Aaker after her mother and grandmother. She remembered her grandmother, a tall stately woman with dark eyes that emphasized her very white hair. Otherwise she was a woman unadorned. No make-up. No vanity. And yet she was beautiful in her carriage and caring ways. Thea adored her, adored her memory. What would she say if she could see her now? Was she looking down from heaven witnessing her granddaughter's horror? For horror it had come to be, this pregnancy and gossip---all in a strange land.

She said some of this to Oliver on their drive home. The doctor had instructed that they stop the car ever so often in order for Thea to walk about for a while. The doctor also said they must drive slowly, an order Oliver accepted to the letter.

"And what I've done to you," Thea said. "Aren't you sorry you ever heard of me? And I wanted to be so much help."

"There you go. Remember what the doctor said. No stress. No worry."

"Can people live like that? Does anyone?"

Oliver nodded.

"How? You worry all the time. About the paper. About the South. About everything. You write out your worries."

"Maybe that's what you ought to do." He added that her mother wrote poetry.

"Why can't you?"

Thea was silent. She was thinking of the same professor who had written her about Tristan and Isolde. He told her once she had talent for writing, but she never paid much attention to it. It seemed such a boring, solitary life. She had seen Grieg's house in Bergen and thought of him sitting in that lovely place alone, writing his music, always writing, never venturing outside or to the stone bluffs below where, indeed, now he lay buried beside his wife high up into the stone: "NINA AND EDVARD."

When they reached home there was a note from Velvet written in pencil. "Miss Lucille come by, say you to call her up on the telephone when you gets back."

She knows! Thea said to herself as she carefully replaced the note.

"She knows," she said to Oliver.

He read the note. "So?"

"She's already told everyone. You'll lose the newspaper. We'll have to move. No one will speak to us in church."

"How did you get this way?" Oliver asked, frowning at her. "Worry, worry about everything."

"I guess it wasn't easy." But her heart was pounding and she could not think. She must plan, plan what she was to say to Lucille, what further lies she would commit.

"To bed," Oliver commanded.

"What?"

"Remember what the doctor said. Every day, in bed."

How could she do such a thing? She had never spent even one day in bed, except when she had the flu once. Almost four months in bed. The thought was more than she could even imagine. And, besides, she had to get her things together so that Sarah and Allison could have the house after their wedding trip. She and Oliver would move to the cabin, as she still referred to Oliver's log house. But it was scarcely that now. The extra bedroom and baths extended the house enormously. The rooms were large and they had found matching logs for the outside. Oliver also had had a sewing room built off the upstairs bedroom.

"It could also be used as a nursery," he said, an odd pride in his voice.

The workmen had almost finished so that Thea would not be disturbed by their coming and going. Velvet would be there to cook the meals and so Thea really didn't mind giving up the large house. As a matter of fact, she was actually pleased to be leaving it. Its rooms were so filled with the dead, but Sarah would change all that. Half of Charleston said they planned to visit. And there was a touch of envy that Thea could not deny. She had no one who could come to visit. No relatives. No friends. No one. She pictured Sarah in her tennis dress entertaining everyone with her laughter and good cheer. Allison was building a tennis court and, in time, a swimming pool. It occurred to Thea that she was absolutely dependent on Sarah---for family, for laughter, for everything.

The next day she telephoned Lucille. She thought all the night before about what she was going to say. She was determined to be civil. In no way did she want Lucille to

think she was hiding something.

"Houghton rez-i-dence," the unmistakable voice of Annie, the maid, reached Thea's ears after an absence of over a year.

"Lucille? Is she there, Annie? This is Thea." She was adamant in her determination not to use the word "Miss" when talking to Annie.

"Miz Lucille. She upstairs. How you?"

"I'm fine. I've missed you."

"You the sweetest thang."

"Thank you. Would you tell Lucille I'm calling."

Long pause. Thea leaned backward in the chair. Her back was bothering her, especially when she sat for a long time. She should be in bed, she thought. The silence grew. Thea thought of hanging up. But she waited. Finally:

"Oh, hello, Thea. I was just talking to cook, planning a little get-together. Can you come?"

Thea breathed an almost audible sigh of relief. "I think not, Lucille."

"Are you still mad at me?"

"I never was," Thea said coolly.

"If you weren't you certainly made a good show of it."

"I'm sorry."

Silence.

"The doctor in Charleston ordered me to bed for a long, long stay."

"Oh! I forgot. I heard all about it. You passed out or something. And you're

PREGNANT! You're the first of my friends to actually be pregnant. How many months?"

Thea gripped the receiver. "Early enough to be sick. Sick every day. It's awful."

"And I wanted you to be in my wedding."

Thea was so taken aback that she held the receiver out from her and stared at it as if the instrument were Lucille herself asking her these outlandish things.

Manipulative. What was her reasoning?"

"Are you there?"

"Yes. Yes. I'm so sorry."

"So am I. I'm having twelve bridesmaids."

"Twelve!" Thea had forgotten. That was what they did in this country. Sometimes they had even more bridesmaids. Pageantry.

"Uh huh," Lucille was saying. "So many people from schools and everywhere. All my friends."

She pronounced "friends" in an almost accusatory way as if to say Thea in some mysterious way had betrayed her, no longer was she a "frin."

"Well, Lucille. I must go now. I don't know how I can stand to be in bed so many months."

"Almost a year," Lucille said. "You'll have to stay in bed that long."

"Not really."

"Oh?"

"I must go now," Thea said. Her back was truly paining her now.

"Bye then."

"Good-bye."

Thea carefully replaced the receiver. She knows. Lucille knows, and the whole town, the county and the state would know before long. They would never forget. There would always be whispers. But what was Lucille planning in her quixotic mind?