

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Velvet handed her the letter. It was from Martha. Thea recognized her sister's handwriting as far away as across the room. It was as if Martha herself were standing there:

"Oh!" Thea said.

"This here come this morning."

Thea adjusted the pillows at her back and sat up in the bed. "This is from my sister," she said, opening the envelope.

"Is?"

"Yes." Thea stared at Velvet, wishing her out of the room. She wanted to read this letter alone without anyone present. Velvet had taken to "visiting," as she called it, over-staying her duties and chatting and chatting. Thea welcomed some of it, but it grew tiresome after awhile. Luckily now she left the room.

Dearest Thea:

What can I say to you? Your letter was so filled with worry and anguish I felt like taking the next ship so that I could be with you. But, Thea, you are married and soon to have your first child. Somehow I can't believe either you or I are old enough to have a child. Time has flown by so. And now we're both married. Think of the happiness ahead. And try to forget what you are going through now.

I know Mater didn't mean what she said to you over the phone. You know how she has her ups and downs even with Papa. For her to say she never wants to see you again is just the opposite of what we both know is her life, actually, and that is you and me. Everything she has ever done has in one way or another involved us.

Of course, Thea, I was a bit shocked---maybe surprised---about the pregnancy. You would have been the same had it been I who conceived prematurely. You know you would. But what is done---is done. And now we will enjoy the child. I never thought I would be an aunt. But now I am so proud. Do take care of yourself. Rest and try not to worry.

Bert Whitfield was here for dinner the other night. He is leaving for Georgia next week. He knows about the pregnancy. He has bought something here for both of you. A wedding gift, which I have seen and envy. Bert is such a charming man and I can't wait for you to know him. He will be your true friend through life. That is the kind of man he is. Lucky is the girl who marries him.

Don't worry. And I send all my love. I will also write Mater and try to soothe her outlook. She has left Minnesota and should be sailing the North Sea as I write.

*Love always,
Martha.*

Thea read and re-read the letter. Martha had no idea about the ways and manners of Georgia. She was writing as if Thea were still living in Kristiania or even Shanghai----much larger and sophisticated places. Martha had no idea what the religious atmosphere was in the American South. Some churches even condemned

dancing---and the communicants appeared to be sane people at that. Thank goodness the Episcopal Church didn't take such stringent views. But pregnancy out-of-wedlock was condemned by everyone. A sin, never to be taken lightly.

Thea stared at Martha's writing without reading the words. Here, before her, was Martha's energy, her twinkling brown eyes and blond hair, teasing, her body gestures, turning this way and that, her utter love of life. How Thea wished for her now. The weather was so all consuming, even with the high ceilings. Velvet showed her how to open all the windows at night and close them by seven in the morning. Fans purred overhead in each room, but Thea longed for water. She believed she would give anything for a swim in cold, not tepid water. In Kristiania and further north they swam all summer. If she could only jump in the water, cleanse herself and become a new person, free of all worries or wrong. If only---

She adjusted the pillows on her bed and picked up the book she was reading, but she immediately let the book drop in her lap. Bert. Bert Whitfield. What was he like? Would he be anything like Oliver? Or Allison? "He will be your friend through life," Martha wrote. It was comforting, the thought of having one so close. It wouldn't be long before he arrived here.

The door opened and Lucille Houghton entered. She was so filled with health and energy, actually prettier than Thea remembered, that Thea sat up. She was not prepared for company. Her hair was casually placed on top of her head and she felt so vulnerable in her pink nightgown and jacket.

Lucille was carrying flowers---pink roses with drooping white phlox. Her face

fairly shone and the white cotton eyelet dress was becoming with her dark tan and hair.

"You look so lovely," Thea said.

"And so do you. Not sick a-tall."

She thrust the flowers toward Thea. "Mother sent these. She's been sick, too."

"Oh. Not very, I hope."

"No." Lucille was staring at the letter in Thea's lap.

Thea rang the small silver bell by her bedside table.

Lucille was more interested in Martha's letter. For what reason, Thea could not possibly divine.

Velvet came in, her eyes wide.

"These are lovely, Velvet. Can you put them in a vase for me? And bring them back? They're so pretty."

Lucille smiled at Velvet.

"I had a letter from my sister Martha," Thea said, trying to explain the letter.

"She's still in Shanghai. Bert is coming home. Martha wrote that he is coming home."

Thea repeated the news because suddenly Lucille's face was a bright red, showing through the tan, even her neck was blushed. It was the name "Bert" that caused this.

There was no doubt.

"Coming here?" Lucille asked.

"Probably not. He'll be staying with Allison and Sarah, I'm sure." Thea gave a little laugh. "It wouldn't be very interesting for him here, just now. All we talk about is babies."

Lucille's eyes were narrowed. She was still staring at Martha's letter as if any moment she would grab it, devour it, consume all the news there was to know about Bert Whitfield.

"Maybe he'll be here in time for your wedding."

Lucille looked sideways and began swinging her right arm as if she held a tennis racket. "There may not be a wedding."

Thea sat up further. "What are you talking about?"

"I dunno. Mother's sick and everything."

"That sick?"

Lucille began looking at the ceiling, walking about the room looking upward. "I like what you've done to this place."

"Oh, thank you. It's mostly Oliver. He did it all."

Lucille turned to Thea, a sweet smile on her face. "It's sort of like camping out. Isn't it? I feel just like I was back in North Carolina. At camp."

Thea said nothing. How like Lucille. She had no idea how hard and to what expense Oliver and she had gone to make this their permanent home. They had taken a few antiques from the big house---with Allison's and Sarah's permission. And the rooms now were actually pretty, even handsome, Thea thought.

"Well, I've got to go now. I hope you get better."

"Thank you." Thea was determined in no way to show her anger.

"Thea?" Lucille turned to her.

"How many months are you? I mean, pregnant? How many more months do you

have to stay in bed, I mean.:

Thea fell back on the pillows. "I don't know. I hope not too many. I get so tired." She had begun to perspire. She felt the beads popping out on her forehead. She even felt her hair dampen.

"I see," said Lucille, frankly staring. Then her mood changed abruptly. She began swinging the imaginary racket again. "I gotta go. See you." She almost sung her farewell, as if she had discovered some newly-found happiness. Bright news that would lighten her day. Something to tell the village. The town crier.

Thea watched the door close. She stared at it. Outside that door, outside this room her future was in shambles. Hers and Oliver's. What would such a scandal do to the newspaper? To her unborn child? Does she know? Does she know? The question persevered in her mind.

The day seemed to stretch forever. Outside the window Thea watched the burning sun. There had been no rain for three weeks. Just sun that now almost hurt her eyes to look at it. And inside everything was airless and long and hot. She could read, she was thinking. Oliver had left her Keynes' "The Economic Consequence of Peace," and only to please Oliver she made an attempt at reading it. It was impossible to read and the book lay by her side, unopened.

Promptly at four o'clock Velvet announced: "He done come."

"Who?" asked Thea. Alarmed at how she looked.

"Man with the collar? White collar? All in black," she added ominously.

"The rector--." Thea half cried out.

"I guess," said Velvet. "He wear a white collar?"

"Yes." Thea said, arranging the sheets and smoothing back her hair from her forehead. The silk bed jacket was wrinkled.

"You want me to say you busy?"

"No. No. I'm here."

Velvet turned at the door. "She here," she called to the unseen person, who obviously had been listening to their conversation.

The greying imminence then half-peeked into the room. Coy.

"Oh, Mr. Randolph. Please do come in. I'm---"

"Is this where the sick lady is?" said the Rev. Mr. Randolph, his blue eyes twinkling with belief and his hair whiter than Thea's sheets. He was visiting the sick, in a coy mood. "You look fine, splendid." His voice fairly boomed. A sound that did not go with his slender look somehow.

Thea smoothed the collar of her bed jacket. "How nice of you to come."

"Yes," agreed the minister. "We have your name on the prayer list."

The custom was new to Thea, praying in church for the ill. She did not altogether care for the rite, her name resounding through the cedar halls of the church, sick and ungainly.

"I'm not really ill. It's just the baby. I nearly lost it, you know." She knew she was making little sense.

The twinkling face fell long and sad. It was a different face, not cherubic, but

almost ugly in its natural stance. "I heard. But you're not going to lose the baby. We're going to do everything the doctor says and have a healthy bouncing baby who will be christened at St. Philips Episcopal Church." He beamed again. "By me."

Thea saw the scene ahead. Her child all in Norwegian tatting and cotton cloth with sprinkles of holy water on its head. And Oliver nearby and Allison and Sarah. A happy occasion? Or would it be just the opposite. Another scene. No one there but Oliver and herself. An outcast. Sinners both, begging for forgiveness and the child's eventual entrance into a Holy Kingdom.

"Now," said the rector. "I've upset you."

"No. No. Won't you have some tea?"

He placed his hands to his mouth in a prayer-like gesture. "No. No." He smiled broadly. "I thought we might have prayers. Everything helps, you know." A joke. His eyes twinkling away.

"Of course."

From out of a side pocket came a slender worn Book of Common Prayer. They were actually going to pray. Thea lying on a bed and the twinkling clergyman solemnly reading the words of the church. It was embarrassing.

O Father of mercies, and God of all comfort, our only help in time of need; we fly unto thee for succor on behalf of this thy servant, here lying in great weakness of body. Look graciously upon her, O Lord; and the more outward woman decayeth, strengthen her, we beseech thee, so much the more continually with thy grace and Holy Spirit in the inner woman. Give her unfeigned repentance for all the errors of her life past, and steadfast faith in thy Son Jesus; and that her sins may be done away by thy mercy, and her pardon

sealed in heaven; through the same thy Son, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Thea watched him lightly brush the Book of Common Prayer and, smiling, place the book back in his hidden pocket.

"Is something the matter?" he asked.

Thea realized she was staring at the man, possibly wildly. He wanted her past sins forgiven. So he knows. This cherubic man knows. Everyone knows. "...unfeigned repentance for all the errors of her life past..." Why else would he pray this if he did not know those errors of the past?

"Shall I call for help?"

A great tightness came to Thea's throat and she knew tears were on her cheeks. Her hands were fisted trying to control herself. Why was she not at home with her mother and friends?

"Child," said the rector, frowning down at her. "Everything will be all right."

Thea shook her head from left to right again and again. Nothing would be all right.

"You must quiet your thoughts," said the rector. "Such happiness lies ahead."

She then took hold. He did not know. The prayer had been a mistake only, chosen at random. She looked into the eyes of this good worried man. "I'm sorry," she managed.

That night she told Oliver about her visitor. He found the rector's visit amusing.

But mainly it was because Thea mimicked him so perfectly...even his Virginia accent, of which, said Oliver, "he is extremely proud." The man, he said, talks of fox hunting constantly, though he has lived in Ashton some twenty-five years and has never gone fox hunting here.

"You sound exactly like him."

"I thought he knew, Oliver."

"If he did he probably didn't care. Robert Randolph entered the ministry because it was a good life, not because of any great belief."

"Good life?"

Oliver nodded. "He goes to all the parties, meets the nicest people. Receives well. People are always giving him things. The Houghtons gave him a car last year. An enormous green Lincoln, and he rides around in it smiling and waving." He came nearer the bed. "But I've great news."

"What?"

"Bert is coming tomorrow. Right here. He's going to help me at the paper."

Thea was slightly disappointed. She was looking forward to meeting Oliver's younger brother, but the fact of his coming was not "great." At least not to her.

"And then there is some bad news."

"What?" Thea studied Oliver's frowning face.

"Telephone calls. Letters. The Klan."

"Oh, no." Thea felt as if she had received a blow to her stomach. She remembered the men she and Oliver faced on the highway. Before her were their

shining fat faces grinning.

"Oh, Oliver, you've got to quit!"

"Quit what?"

"Stirring up everything. Things will change one day. The colored will find their way."

"Not if people around here have anything to do with it." He turned toward the door, impatient. "It's just not right."

Thea watched him go. There were so many fears. The unborn child who was restless now, kicking and moving inside her. And there were the people of this insular town, ready and willing and wanting to believe the worst about anybody. Their emptiness was fed by the wrongs of others. "I feel so sorry for her" was nothing but a lie. Their outward goodness and inward excitement was obscene and almost worse than the criminal element who got their excitement from killing people, hanging the powerless, power-mad ignorance.

And here I am. In bed, she said to herself. Mourning for home and the familiar, where such things as hangings and murder scarcely exist. Close your ears, she said to herself, and then aloud, "...so that you can survive."

She thought of Bert, Cuthbert Whitfield. The picture of him in her mother-in-law's house was before her eyes---the dark hair, light eyes (almost spiritual eyes) and the firm mouth and jaw were pleasing to look at. Oliver said Cuthbert was six feet, three inches---an inch taller than Oliver. Would he like her? Thea wondered. How would the two brothers get along working together? Oliver appeared to be genuinely fond of his

younger brother, perhaps more so than he was of Allison, if such a thing were possible. She hated for Bert to see her the way she looked now. His first impression would be of a very fat young woman who spoke with an accent. All the Whitfields, even the vague cousins, took such pride in their family, boasting of land grants and touches of royalty — very small touches, Thea concluded.

That night Thea was alone in the house. Oliver had driven Velvet home and was to go by the newspaper for a while. Thea re-read Martha's letter. If Martha like^P Cuthbert so much, Thea was bound to like him. She and Martha usually liked the same people. She replaced the letter in the drawer by her bed. She was not sleepy in the slightest and she longed to get out of the bed, go outside in the night and stretch her body. So much inertia was making her restless. She went to the window to look out and there---- Her heart leapt! There were people out there, all among the pine trees, men in white, circulating and pointing. She stood back from the window and turned out the lights. Surely, they wouldn't come in the house. There was no doubt. The dreaded Ku Klux Klan was on their property.

Thea ran to the telephone to call Oliver. But no one answered. No one. The silence in the house grew, but outside there were swishing sounds and mumbled voices, Southern voices, deep and whining.

The cross lit all the pine trees and even part of the sky. There was a thump at the front door and Thea stood, her heart electric with fear. She could not swallow. Were they coming after her? Because she was a foreigner? She heard they disliked foreign

people and Jews and Catholics and Negroes. They formed a circle and the cross flamed. What if the house caught afire? Thea, her hand to her throat, stood still as a frightened deer. Never had she known such fear. America was a wilderness, a wild wilderness that would never be tamed. And then there was silence. Thea stepped to the window and all she saw was the smoldering wood and embers across the arm of the cross. The men were gone as quickly as they had come.

After a while she went to the front porch and there she saw a piece of white paper nailed to one of the slender pillars. She glanced about, picked up the paper and went back inside, making sure the front door was locked.

*WE SEEN YOU RIDIN SIDE BY SIDE WITH YO NIGGER
WOMAN. THIS HERE'S YO LAST WARNIN. TO BOTH OF
YOU, THE NIGGER AND YOU. WATCH OUT FOR YO
PRETTY BLOND WIFE. THIS HERE'S A WARNING.*

KKK

Thea held the crude notice in her hand. The handwriting was slanted like a child's. The smell of burning wood was everywhere, all through the house and Thea felt the beginnings of nausea and then pain. It, the pain, was small at first. Then it grew. She went back to her bed and lay there, the paper still in her hand.

"Thea!"

It was Oliver

"Hospital. Take me to the hospital. . . . The Klan."

Oliver said nothing. All she remembered was the silence as they drove and then the sight of the low-slung brick hospital. The pain was increasing. And she cried out.

"It's all right," Oliver was saying.

She was in his arms, being carried and then someone else took her.

"The dilations's stopped," said a woman's voice.

"All right. All right," came the man's voice.

The pain had ceased. Thea was lying in a green room with bright lights centered over her. She was lying on a table with a white sheet covering her.

A nurse with gauze over her mouth leaned toward her. "You all right, honey. Feel any more pain?"

Thea tried to rise.

"No, no, hon. You just lie there for a while."

"Mrs. Whitfield," said Dr. Armstrong, "You've had a close call. No walking about any more. Not till we get this baby here. It's trying too hard to get here 'fore its time."

"Where are they?" Thea asked.

"Who?"

"The men in white? Where are they?"

"They're bringing in other patients now."

Thea shook her head. "No. No. No."

"You feelin pain, hon?"

It was useless. Thea lay there. She still had the baby. The men and the cross! Where was Oliver? She began to weep, softly at first, then she was crying like a child, as she had years ago after a skiing accident.

"Women get emotional when they're carryin," said the doctor.

He didn't understand. She asked for Oliver again.

"He isn't 'loud to come in here," said the nurse. "You'll be seein him. When you get back to your room."

Thea said nothing, the tears hot on her cheeks. Would any of this, any of it, ever be finished? "Oliver," she mumbled.