

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

As the week crawled into months, Thea gradually regained her strength and in August felt a well-being she had not experienced since her marriage. Even her appearance seemed to heal. Her reflection in the mirror showed a glowing one. Her hair, which had darkened in the earlier months of her pregnancy, was now light and thick again, and her eyes were full and expectantly grey.

There was no hint by anyone that her pregnancy was anything but on course, and everyone sympathized with her, sending flowers and books and diet delicacies aimed to distract her from her "difficulties."

But it was Cuthbert Whitfield who was the main distraction. He arrived on one of the hottest days on record in August. Thea had closed the windows early and the ceiling fans whirled throughout the house. Sarah had come to see about everything, since Thea had said she did not want her new brother to see the house in disarray.

The first thing Thea noted about Cuthbert (or Bert as he was called), was his eyes. He had the same general teasing look from them that Oliver had. But his eyes were sky blue, autumn blue that reacted differently to each occasion. When he was listening to music they were softened. The Ku Klux Klan, which Oliver talked about incessantly, caused the eyes to deepen, even in color. There was introspection, tension and sensuality — all if it — in his face.

Thea liked him instantly. And it was the first time in a long time that a man's face caused a slight skip-beat of her heart. How could this be? She wondered. A married woman about to deliver her first child — attracted to her husband's brother? Thea put it all down to her condition. She felt so many conflicting emotions now.

In a way, Bert was more like Allison than Oliver. Both were handsome men — in their height and general bone structure, though Allison was blond and Bert, a decided brunette. Oddly, the second thing Thea noticed was the few strands of grey weaving in and out of Bert's otherwise dark hair. And he was the youngest brother.

"And here is my old grey-haired brother," Oliver introduced Bert to Thea. "Home from China. Can't even eat ice cream."

And he could not. At table, Leuvonia served macaroon ice cream. And Thea watched Bert as he tasted the dessert, then hastily spooned it as if he could not get enough. In no time he put his hand to his forehead as if in pain. Indeed, he was in pain. The cold had hurt even his eyes. In explanation he said there was no such thing in China and it had been an age since he had tasted anything "this good."

Thea was taken with his almost child-like enthusiasm. He loved music and

constantly brought Thea and Oliver records: Lawrence Tibbett singing "Alone" was his favorite. Next he played "Blue Skies" and turning the record over there was "Grey Skies — Grey Days — nothing but grey days since you've gone. . . ."

Thea and Bert, who had now moved to the cabin on a more or less permanent arrangement, sat evening after evening listening to records, talking about Martha and Shanghai. He even went shopping for Velvet so he could carry the heavy bags of groceries into the house.

He liked tennis and he vowed as how he would be the first to challenge Thea to a game after the delivery. He had played tennis with Martha in Shanghai. "And she damn near beat me."

"No woman can ever beat a man," Thea said. "But I always beat Martha," she teased.

All in all, Bert's entrance into their lives was a god send. Oliver was always working or going to meetings and it was lonely lying on the sofa alone. She still had not made close friends. There was Sarah, of course, but Sarah had already made so many acquaintances in the town that she was kept inordinately busy.

"They just don't like me," she told Bert one night as they were discussing various personalities in Ashton.

"Why not?" and his blue eyes softened as he seemed to examine Thea's face for some answer.

"I think it's because I'm not Southern. You know, foreign. I think they just don't understand."

"I think it's jealousy," said Bert. "Here you are — this beautiful creature, sophisticated in a way, and they're so 'down home' so to speak."

Kindness, she knew, was central in the Whitfield family — kindness and honor — and Bert, Thea observed, was filled with both. He was courteous to everyone — to Velvet, to the yardman Amos, all.

One night Oliver arrived from work, his hat tilted on the back of his head. He looked so tired.

"Good story, Bert," Oliver said, pouring himself a ^{glass}~~drink~~ of brandy.

Thea rose from the sofa purely by habit. The two brothers would now discuss the paper, the price of cotton and the South's hoped-for recovery. They appeared never to tire of their talk and Thea, not wanting to interrupt, always left them at this juncture in the evening.

Oliver helped her to the bedroom.

"Is Bert any trouble to you? If he's in the way — just let me know."

"Oh, no," Thea protested. "He's such a help, and I do enjoy my new brother-in-law."

"Good!" Oliver said nonchalantly and just as nonchalantly gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"I feel so unattractive," Thea volunteered.

"You're not. Bert likes you. He thinks you're the most beautiful woman he's ever met."

"You lie so well." But she enjoyed the compliment. She felt a slight rush of

energy.

"I never lie," said Oliver almost wistfully. He was so tired.

After he left Thea sat at the dresser and examined her face. She was smiling, accepting Bert's compliment with something almost kin to joy. Oliver was so frugal with compliments. And she meant what she said about Bert's living with them. In no way was he an intrusion on Oliver's and her lives as he might have been. He was a welcomed presence and Thea made sure to say this as often as she could. She wanted him to feel as "at home" as he would have been in the Whitfield house, should he have chosen to live with Sarah and Allison. She wondered if his decision had anything to do with Oliver. Perhaps Oliver told him how lonely she sometimes was, whereas Sarah was a southern young woman and made friends so easily. And there was also, always, the Klan.

Thea turned from her image in the mirror and vowed not to think of anything unpleasant until the baby was born.

So as the autumn came and the weather cooled, Thea was more conscious than ever of her "enormous" body. One morning a letter arrived from Shanghai addressed to both Thea and Bert. It was an alarming letter in a way. Remnants of the old Boxers were everywhere, Martha wrote, and one had to be extremely careful because of the growing bandit element in the country. "We are called 'foreign devils' and any day now I think we may have to evacuate."

Bert read the letter and placed it aside. "I wish I were there."

"You miss it. Don't you?" Thea asked.

"Yes."

"You don't like it here?"

"Oh, yes!" He half-smiled. "You know I'm very lucky. I'm doing the one thing in the world I like — writing and reporting — And I'm actually paid for it."

There was sweetness in the man, too, Thea thought. Still, it couldn't be the most pleasant thing in the world, working for one's brother, even if he were so much younger. And Thea knew, too, the longing for another place. Perhaps it was this that brought her closer to her husband's brother. They had the bond of longing together.

"Some day I'm going back to the foreign field again."

"Oh, I don't know. You'll probably meet some lovely belle and live here forever."

He stood then. "Never." The word was determined; but to half-cover it he looked back at Thea lying on the sofa with the knitted throw covering her enormous stomach and he smiled. Half in apology. Yet the restlessness remained and Thea somehow felt it was necessary to cherish these days. Too soon he would be gone, this lovely gypsy of a man.

But cherish or not, all thoughts except one dwelled on Thea's mind. Pain. One mid-morning she felt the first beginnings of hurt. She called out to Velvet. "Freedonia. Fetch Freedonia!" She had met the black mid-wife several times during her pregnancy. A dark, frowning, wiry woman, Freedonia claimed to have "buthed" seventy-eight "chirrun." And they's all still living."

Velvet stared at Thea. "It comin?"

"Run, Velvet. Freedonia."

"Yes'm. Better we call Mr. Oliver, too."

Thea nodded.

"You be alone by yourself?"

"Just run."

Thea's mouth was dry and she lay still on the bed as if she were listening for something. She breathed heavily as she waited for another pain to stab. She remembered her aunt, her mother's sister, who was plagued with dark shadows in her life. Thea remembered her telling Thea and Martha about the birth of her own dead child. The actual birthing was so real and terrible that Martha and Thea vowed never to have children.

But here it was again! Pain, another country. Thea had never felt such pain. Her whole body was wringing wet, even the bed, and then as if the pain were a person, it faded away. And she waited for it to come again. She pictured Velvet running. How long would it be before she returned? The image of her aunt returned. She was sitting in her house. Laughing boys were throwing stones at the house. And her aunt stood at the window, her eyes enormous as she chewed her white gown, a frightened agony of a woman. And again, the pain! Thea closed her eyes, seeing her aunt, waiting for the tearing pain to vanish. The pain and her aunt were the same. The hurt was her aunt, madness, coming and going.

A car door slammed outside. Oliver, his tie askew, came running into the room, his face grey.

"Get the midwife," Thea managed as she endured a harder pain.

"Is it?"

Thea nodded.

"Oh my god."

"Go."

"We need a doctor!"

"Go. Hurry, Velvet. Drive them both back!" She could say no more. Heaviness and fatigue were like hands holding her down, and her mouth was so dry.

Oliver soon returned with what looked like an army of black women headed by Freedonia, the midwife, and Velvet, last. All of the women wore expressions of nonchalance as if a woman in labor was absolutely nothing, even boring.

"She dialatin," said the midwife. "It coming," she said to Thea. "And we wants to just let this chile have its own way getting here, too."

"Water," Thea said.

"Can't have no water." She turned to Velvet. "Go on now," she ordered in an entirely different voice, "git me a rag with water on it. We wants to keep her lips dewy-like."

Velvet vanished.

In the corner of the room near the door stood Oliver. He was actually cowering. Thea wanted him near. She wanted to grab his hands. But he left the room.

"Noooo," Thea half shouted. She wanted to scream with pain, but she could not. All Aakers bore all things. Her dark aunt returned again---boys throwing stones. "You

come into this world alone and you go out alone." Was she to die? Here? With these strange women probing her with black hands?

"Push, honey," said the midwife. "Push hard so's we can get this here baby in the wuld."

It was the dryness of her mouth and throat that was almost worse than the pain. Water. "Water," she muttered.

"Now push harder."

She wondered if she were sweating blood. The whole bed was soaked as if bath water had been poured there. The room was dizzy, going round and round and the far voice saying over and over "Push, honey."

Two other women were holding her legs. She realized she had been kicking at the woman, but being held this way was unbearable. She tried to call out to Oliver, but no sound came — only a gurgling. "Water."

And then the women began to drift away, began to sit in various chairs. The midwife sat with her arms folded in front of her, pouting.

"What's the matter?" Thea asked.

"Ain't ready to come yet awhile. We just bidin our time till the baby let us know."

"It don't seem to want to come," said Velvet. "Miss Thea, you all right?"

Thea turned from the woman, but then the pain came again, lasting longer than the last one. Her aunt was weeping in the corner of the room.

"Magda," she called out to her aunt.

Only moaning. The black women, all moaning in unison.

She dozed, only to be awakened by sharper pains. Her whole body ached. The tears streamed down her face.

And then a baby's wailing. Blessedness.

"Hits a boy!" cried Velvet.

Thea slept and afterward the smiling midwife placed the baby in Thea's arms. But she immediately asked the woman to take the baby.

"You don't wanta see this here chile?" He's all yor'n."

Thea shook her head.

"I never heard tell of no woman that didn't want to see her own chile. He such a pretty baby, too." She shot a glance at Thea, a suspicious eye.

"Water," was all Thea said.

Velvet lifted Thea and placed a cup of water to her lips. And then she dozed again, dreaming of home. Her mother was soothing her brow with a dampened cloth, saying such sweet things. "Thea dear. Lovely Thea. Such a glorious day." all in Norwegian.

It was only three days later that Thea heard rumblings that there may be something wrong with the baby Christian, whom she named for her father. She heard them talking out in the hall. Oliver and Sarah and the doctor.

"Otherwise it's perfectly healthy. He'll just need more care than your average child," said the doctor.

"How could this be?" asked Oliver.

"Inheritance," said the doctor.

Then the word "albino" reached Thea's ears. It struck her like a lightning flash. True, she had wondered about the child's eyes. The lids were deep red and the irises a light blue. Carried by black hands, the whiteness of the baby's skin was in sharp contrast. Thea at first thought the appearance was just the child's early age, that the eyes and the skin would change in time. She asked the doctor about his eyesight. "Can't see too much yet." But there was something about the heartbeat that caused a frown on the doctor's face.

Whether it was this, the birth deficiency or the charm of the small baby, whatever, Thea found herself utterly transfixed by the little creature. And the feeling grew stronger day by day. The child was so vulnerable, helpless, and he would have to go through life different, a stranger. There would never be children anywhere similar to him in looks.

Oliver tried to make the best of the situation. Yes, the baby would be different, he said, but so was everybody. "All children, people are different. Little Christian's difference will be more visible. That's all."

But the child was so innocent of the pain he was bound to suffer. His smile was Oliver's smile, so trusting that he would be loved, that life would be fair and good. Thea watched him as he yawned, slept in her arms, breathing with such confidence, and she vowed then and there that this child would never suffer, not because of an accident of creation.

But then way in the night she wondered if this was God's punishment to her and

Oliver. Could it be? Was there such an angry God?

She said nothing about this to anyone. In church she prayed for forgiveness. "God will forgive all," the rector said in one of his sermons. Thea wondered and prayed and wondered again. Could any of it be true?

As the baby developed, Thea saw the defined features of her father, also Martha's. For sure the baby would be tall like her father. No one would be allowed to hurt this child. No one. She vowed this to God and man.

As the weeks and months came and went, Thea also was pleased that her figure was returning to its regular form. It was almost as if she had never existed in the other world of heaviness and despair. No one, as far as she knew, mentioned the fact that the baby was born early. The trip to Charleston had covered that for all of them.

She even played a few games of tennis with Bert. These were fine autumn days, blue sky and brisk air. They returned to the house laughing and in high spirits because the heat had lifted and the long autumn months would stretch into December before the cold came.

Lucille was a frequent visitor to the "cabin," as they called their house now. Thea noted that the visits were timed by Bert's schedule — exactly when he returned to the house after work. When Thea fixed Bert's drink for the afternoon she always put out an extra glass for Lucille. She liked to tease Bert about this. He just shook his head, saying nothing.

Oliver was so busy with the paper that he scarcely had time even for little Christian. Indeed Thea wondered if the child would grow up thinking Bert was his

father. Bert spent time with the baby, whether out of love or pity, Thea never knew. The child was so bright, curious about everything. Rarely did he cry. His smile was near heart-breaking, so innocent was he of the world.

“Has there been this trait in your family?” Bert asked one day.

“Albinos?” Thea, unlike others in the house, had no qualms speaking the word.

Bert nodded.

“Not that I know of. Of course, the blonds in the family all have little Christian’s hair.”

“Platinum.” Bert smiled, the half-smile that was also Oliver’s.

Thea had never heard the expression before and she frowned.

“Just jargon. A compliment really.”

As the winter months came on it was Bert who taught the baby to walk. He held a walking stick and the baby clutched the stick also. Then Bert withdrew his hands and the child kept walking, holding the cane upright. Thea laughed out loud at the sight, the tiny baby walking with such a long stick, so proud of himself, laughing with delight.

But then the child took to falling. Sarah suggested there might be something wrong with his eyes. Thea looked at the weak reddened eyes and a shudder went through her body. Please God, don’t let him be blind.

The pediatrician that Thea took him to said that in time, a matter of months, the child would need glasses. He had only ten percent vision. Thea looked at the child sitting in the doctor’s chair wearing thick spectacles the doctor had placed on the small face. It changed his looks completely. Thea saw the years to come: her sweet child

burdened with the heavy glasses, and her whole being ached for the future.