

SECOND CHANCE SWEETHEARTS

From the collection “Beach Season”

by

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Who so loves believes the impossible.

--Elizabeth Barrett Browning

CHAPTER 1

The August light had not yet faded from the sky when thirty-four-year-old Thea Foss began to settle in for the night. It was quiet, as it always seemed to be at this time of the evening at this time of the year; birds and non-predatory wildlife had long gone to bed. An occasional firefly flitted past the windows; Thea remembered catching them when she was a child, though as an adult she thought the practice a bit cruel. Later on in the night, a wakeful listener might expect to hear the melancholy hoot of an owl.

Though it was too early in the year for a fire, the night air was becoming progressively cooler as the month wore on. Thea went into the small bedroom and pulled from a drawer a heavy cotton sweater she had worn in college. The neckline was slightly frayed and what once had been a deep orange was now a rather faded melon color, but the sweater was roomy and comfortable. As she pulled it over her

head she caught a glimpse of herself in the old cracked mirror over the painted wood dresser. Basically, she liked what she saw.

She was of average height, about five feet four when she wasn't slouching, which she tended to do when she was tired, just like her father. She had never been thin or fat, always what in an earlier day had been known as "pleasingly plump," and not much concerned about being any other way. Her eyes were a very pale blue and her hair a sort of red-gold now, though when she was little it was what her mother had called strawberry blond. She had worn glasses since the age of nine, contacts since the age of twenty-four or so, but only on certain occasions when it was easier, like on a really rainy day when glasses would spatter and then steam up when you went into a store or got onto a bus, or on really sunny days, when switching from sunglasses to regular glasses again and again could be annoying. She had never been a beach bunny so her skin was virtually flawless, though vaguely freckled. If asked, Thea would describe herself as a person who didn't stand out in a crowd, though, of course, a few people in her life would argue this. Like, for one, her mother, and, for another. . . . Well, he was long gone out of her life. Hugh Landry's opinions, though once so important, no longer mattered to her.

Thea went back to the living room and surveyed her surroundings. She had moved into the apartment about two weeks earlier, committing to a two-month stay, with an extension to be mutually decided upon after six weeks. She had paid her landlady, a friendly woman named Alice Moore, in cash and in full, mostly in order to avoid Alice's running a credit check. What Alice would find if she did might cause her to close the door against her new tenant.

The apartment was small and charming. It occupied the lower floor of a wood frame house built about thirty-years earlier—Alice lived on the main floor—and opened out directly onto a small, rustic patio set with a tiny table, two narrow wooden chairs, and an old but serviceable grill Thea had no idea how to use. A birdfeeder was always occupied, sometimes by a marauding squirrel, but most often by a large variety of small and colorful birds. More feeders were

attached to the back porch of the house, above Thea's apartment. Twelve Oak Street was one of the most popular sites among the local avian community.

The house had a spacious sunroom on its east side and a large, open deck on its west side, as well as a sleeping loft above the main floor. It was surrounded by a field that was the home of strutting wild turkeys, grazing deer, and an abundance of plants and wildflowers, many of which Thea could not name. An ancient, low stonewall, erected by some long-dead farmer, cut across the field in a slightly wavering line, providing a sort of Roman road for the neighboring cats and other small, furry animals to traverse. Just beyond the field began a dense wood, now a wall of thick green leaves atop the massive gray and brown trunks of oaks and maples and the thinner trunks of the occasional white birches.

It was a quiet and peaceful place, close to idyllic, especially for someone who had been through what Thea had recently been through. She was finally beginning to feel comfortable, just a bit, after a period of immense trial. A two-week sojourn in this cozy little apartment in a pretty little vacation town, among people who knew nothing about her except what she wanted them to know, which was virtually nothing, was beginning to work wonders on her nerves.

Thea made a cup of Lipton tea, always reliable and less expensive than the fancy brands that she enjoyed but couldn't really afford, and began to scan the stacks of books that were piled on the floor against one wall. She had brought a large box of books with her from Massachusetts, and Alice had generously offered her full access to her own impressive library, some of which had overflowed into the lower apartment. Enticingly, Alice's library included several volumes of a very early twentieth-century collection of the complete works of Honore de Balzac, in French. It was a bit of a dream come true for Thea, at least for now. So many books and for once, for a while, so much time in which to read them!

The difficulty, of course, was choosing a particular book to match her mood at a particular moment. Thea picked up a fairly recent

biography of Margaret of Anjou, wife of Henry VI. She had been extremely lucky to find it at a secondhand bookstore for a really affordable price. No doubt it would be fascinating reading—the reviews were good—but at that moment...

Thea returned the biography to the box and chose instead something completely different, a Georgette Heyer detective novel, written in the late 1930s. She had read it before but found she never tired of Ms. Heyer's plodding but brilliant detectives, overly suave young gentlemen, madcap young women, and hysterical middle-aged matrons. Plus, the period slang was lots of fun. She settled into an old and very comfortable armchair upholstered in chintz. You might not like chintz all that much, Thea reflected looking down at the massive pink cabbage roses pictured against a faded mint green background, but it was hard not to feel somewhat cheered by its presence in a room. All I need now, she thought, to make this moment perfect, is a cat on my lap. But a cat would come soon enough, she vowed. There was a shelter not too far from her parents' house back in Massachusetts and—

Thea's brief reverie was blasted by the ringing of her cell phone. She shot to her feet and, after a moment's hesitation, stumbled over to the occasional table on which the phone sat, attached to its charger. Her heart was racing, as it always did when the phone rang. She peered down at the number displayed on the screen. It was a number she didn't recognize. She still hadn't touched the phone, as if by doing so she would unleash something bad or evil into the room.

The phone continued to ring. Her heart now began to pound uncomfortably hard. As far as she knew the only people who had this number were her parents and the people at the phone company. She let the call go to voice mail.

While only a moment before she had felt in a bit of an enchanted space, she now felt exposed. The large windows of the apartment's living room were no longer access to a natural paradise but portals through which a human being with malevolent intent might peer, a thing far worse than a goblin or even a hungry black bear.

The call had registered in voice mail. Carefully, Thea pushed the appropriate key and with her eyes squished shut, her lips pressed together, she listened. At the first note of the cheery feminine voice, she walked back to the chair and dropped into it with relief. It was nothing but a prerecorded courtesy call from her bank—of course they would have her number!—something about a new savings program she might want to explore. She sank back with a deep and trembling sigh.

Nothing important. Nobody of significance. She was safe for now.

But it didn't matter, Thea thought, pulling her sweater closer around her, her book forgotten, her cup of tea getting cold. It could have been Mark Marais. It could always, at any time, be Mark Marais.

CHAPTER 2

Tuesday morning found Thea sitting in Alice's kitchen, sipping very strong, very good coffee and eyeing a loaf of banana bread Alice was just taking out of the oven. Theo hadn't planned to spend her morning with her landlady, but Alice pretty much forced the issue, and the smell of the bread baking in the oven upstairs had only added to Alice's argument. Besides, after that call the night before it had been a long time before Thea had managed to fall asleep, and when she finally had, her sleep had been restless, interrupted by anxious dreams. A big cup of good coffee might help hurtle her into the day ahead.

"We'll just let that cool for a few minutes and then it's every woman for herself." Alice placed the warm bread on a trivet and brought it to the kitchen counter. She was dressed in a pair of faded

jeans, a white Oxford shirt rolled up at the sleeves, and navy sneakers. She was a tall woman, about six feet, and broad in the shoulder and hip, though not overweight. Her hair was thick and silvery gray and came to her shoulder. This morning it was pulled into a neat ponytail. Thea wondered what color it had been originally but thought that to ask would be impertinent. Alice's eyes were very bright blue and very keen. Her skin showed some damage, possibly caused by too many hours in the sun without a hat or long sleeves, but her smile was strong and overall, Thea found, Alice gave the impression of a woman much younger than her fifty-three years. Alice had told Thea her age on the day she had signed the lease. Thea still didn't know why; her landlady's personal information was of no concern to her. But some people seemed prone to sharing every little thing about themselves. Maybe Alice was one of those people.

"Everything all right downstairs?" Alice asked, pouring more coffee from a glass French press pot.

"Oh, yes," Thea said. "It's a lovely apartment." In spite, she added silently, of all those windows. What was I thinking when I agreed to move in? Oh, right, I wasn't thinking, at least not clearly.

"It helps pay the mortgage," Alice was saying. "Renting it out, I mean."

"Oh."

"And when I manage to get a tenant like you, someone nice and quiet, it makes it all the better. I think I told you that I work from home. Nothing worse than trying to write an article on shrinking coral reefs while some idiot's blaring one of those oversouling singers under your feet."

"Oversouling?" Thea questioned

"Yeah, it's when those pop singers who all sound alike give every word about twenty-three syllables. I read the term somewhere online, 'oversouling.' Give me Frank Sinatra any day."

"Oh. But surely you interview the tenant first," Thea said. "To make sure he—or—she is, you know, more mature?"

"Of course. But I've been fooled. Not often, but it's happened."

Alice, deeming the banana bread was ready for consumption, cut several slices, and slid one onto the plate set before Thea.

“There’s the butter, and that jam is boysenberry, I think. Some kind of berry other than straw. Never was a big fan.”

Thea smiled and reached for the butter. Really, in the light of day, sitting in a cozy kitchen, slathering butter on homemade banana bread, the fears and anxieties of the night before seemed almost silly.

Almost.

“Let me guess,” Alice said suddenly. “You’re running away from a bad relationship.”

Thea almost choked. Had Alice been reading her mind? “How did you know,” she asked a bit warily.

“Why else does a young, single woman move to a small town where she knows nobody and rents an apartment from another single woman in a house on a dead-end road, miles from the center of town?”

Thea took another sip of her coffee. It really was very good. She probably owed her hostess some sort of an answer, if only in thanks for the breakfast.

“I was married,” she said finally, not meeting Alice’s eye. “It didn’t work out.”

Alice nodded briskly. “That’s too bad. I was married, too. Twice. Both husbands died before their time. A shame.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Thea said sincerely.

“Yeah. Me, too. They were good men and the relationships were good, too. If I’m at all lucky, and I seem not to be, I’ll meet another good man and marry him. I’m not that old. I don’t flatter myself, but I still look pretty appealing seen from a certain angle in a certain sort of dim light.”

“You would get married again,” Thea asked, “after being widowed twice? I don’t know, that seems so...risky.”

“Sure, I’d get married again,” Alice said robustly. “The relationships didn’t suck, it was the husbands dying part that sucked.”

“But you’d be taking such a chance of being hurt again...”

Alice shook her head and reached for another slice of banana bread. “Better than being alone for the next twenty or thirty years. Some people aren’t cut out for the solitary life. I’m one of them.”

“But you seem so...”

“Self-sufficient? Reasonably happy? That doesn’t mean I’m not lonely.”

No, Thea thought, she supposed that it didn’t. “Well, I’ll never get married again,” she said emphatically. “Or move in with someone or even date someone seriously. I’m done with relationships. I’m just fine on my own. I always have been.”

“Then why did you get married in the first place?”

Was that question a challenge, Thea wondered, or was Alice simply curious? Either way, how to explain—and to a virtual stranger, at that, why she had married Mark Marais? It wasn’t something she could fully explain to herself.

“I made a mistake,” she said after a moment. It wasn’t a lie.”

“Ah. Well, we all make mistakes on occasion, as I’ve admitted.”

Thea felt that she had revealed enough about her personal life for one morning. “Well,” she said, rising from her seat. “I should get going. Thanks for the coffee, Alice, and the breakfast. It was very good. I’m afraid I can’t make a decent cup of coffee at all, let alone bake.”

“You’re welcome,”

Alice said, “Thanks for the chat. As I said, I’m not one for the solitary life. It helps to have someone around every once in a while. But don’t worry, I’m not going to interfere with your seclusion.”

Thea, already at the front door, turned back. “Oh, I wasn’t worried,” she said.

“Yes, you were.”

Thea smiled in spite of herself. “Maybe a little.”

CHAPTER 3

Thea was scheduled to work from 11:00 to 3:00 at Maggie's diner. At 10:40, she parked her car in a small lot reserved for employees of the diner and a few of the other businesses in the heart of town and waded through vacationers on their way to the beach or the shops.

She had waited tables back in college and then in graduate school and she still generally enjoyed the work. It was mindless enough to be left in the restaurant at the end of the workday, and yet required enough attention and social skill to keep her interested. Sure, there were the occasional difficult customers to contend with, the sort who were never, ever pleased, and the overly permissive parents who seemed to think that it was okay for their precious kiddies to throw food and fits without check, but compared to some of the other part-time jobs she had held—baby-sitting a truly incorrigible three-year-old and working the deep fryer at a local fast-food joint, for example—waiting tables was a pleasure.

At the end of the shift, which had been busy but largely uneventful, a young waitress named Kathy invited Thea to go out for a drink that evening with some of her friends. It wasn't the first time Kathy had asked Thea to socialize and it wasn't the first time Thea had politely declined. It was true that she didn't want to get too close to anyone as she planned to leave Ogunquit before the winter, but the primary reason she preferred to keep to herself was the fear of exposure. What if she did let someone know about the disaster her life had been for the past few years, and what if, crazily, that someone knew Mark Marais and told him where she could be found...

Yes, Thea knew she was being dramatic, maybe even overly cautious, but sometimes drama and caution were called for.

Interestingly, she didn't feel so worried about being found out when she was with Alice, though she still had no intention of telling her the gory details of her spectacularly bad marriage and divorce.

After waving goodbye to the other staff, Thea left the diner and joined the crowd of vacationers making their way from the beach to an ice cream shop, from a long lunch in the Cove to a motel for a nap, from Bread and Roses bakery on Main street to the antique store a few doors down from the post office. At the corner of Beach and Main Streets, Thea stopped to wait for a lull in the traffic before risking her life crossing. It was a notoriously busy corner and one with no traffic lights or crossing guard or police personnel to bring order to chaos.

A loud male voice boomed through the throng gathered with her on the sidewalk. Thea startled and a small cry escaped her lips. The two teenage girls standing next to her giggled.

“Yo! Dude, it is you!”

It was only an enthusiastic teenage boy, now pushing his way through the crowd to slap the upraised hand of a buddy. Thea felt foolish. At the same time she wanted to shake those girls who had laughed at her. She wanted to tell them that life just might test them the way she had been tested and that someday they, too, might jump at the ringing of a phone or a raised male voice.

But, of course, she did no such thing. She just stood there like every other solid citizen and waited for a break in the traffic. She had read somewhere that the town's population swelled to around twenty thousand in the summer. It was easy to believe, especially if you were silly or crazy enough to attempt to drive through the heart of downtown Ogunquit anytime between five in the afternoon and eight at night and actually expect to make your dinner reservation.

In spite of the crowding, Ogunquit certainly had its share of charm. The town's library was housed in a beautiful stone building set on a perfectly manicured lawn. Harbor Candy, a family-owned shop on Main Street, had been handcrafting its chocolates and other treats since 1956. A fleet of brightly painted trolleys carried visitors through Ogunquit and down into Wells.

And, as with any vacation destination, there was plenty of shopping to be had. There were low-end gift shops, the kind that sold inflatable beach toys, T-shirts with silly slogans involving lobsters, and novelty gifts like snow globes filled with sand instead of artificial snow; and there were the high-end shops, like Abacus, which was more of an art gallery than anything else. You could buy a baseball cap at one end of town for a few dollars and a one-of-a-kind gold-and-diamond necklace at the other end of town for a small fortune. With little if any disposable income, Thea avoided all the shops except for the Hannaford in York, the huge grocery store that sold everything from fresh and prepared foods to pharmaceuticals to kitchen utensils to pet carriers.

The same held for the restaurants. Thea ate her meals at home, though she was entitled to a reasonable meal after her shift at the diner, and sometimes she took advantage of that offer. Not for her the high-end places like MC Perkins Cove or 98 P.R.O.V.E.N.C.E., or even Barnacle Billy's. But that was okay. She wasn't in Ogunquit to see and be seen. She was there to lay low and recover a bit of her sanity. Besides, she had never been fussy about food. As long as it was served in a copious amount, she was pretty much satisfied. Alice seemed to have sensed that about her.

Thea reached the employee parking lot and got into her car, a 1987 Clunker. She had bought it for next to nothing because it was worth next to nothing. To help pay for the divorce she had to sell her almost brand-new car, and finding herself momentarily desperate for a mode of transportation, she had jumped at the dubious deal offered by the Clunker's owner. She doubted this "gently used" vehicle would last the winter; the power steering was squealing, the shock absorbers were chunking, and the brakes were grinding, but she hadn't bought it with an eye to an investment. Just before she had left home for Ogunquit her father had offered to help her with the cost of a good secondhand car. The last thing Thea wanted to do was turn to her parents for support after all that had happened, but she was afraid she

was going to have to swallow her pride and accept some financial support in the form of a loan.

Thea pulled out into the summer traffic and headed back to her apartment in Alice's remotely situated house. Another day was coming to an end, another day of refuge in a town largely populated by seasonal transients, people she would never come to know. And another long evening lay ahead, during which, Thea promised herself, she would try very hard not to have a minor nervous breakdown if the phone rang. She stopped to let a strolling, cuddling couple cross the road. The sight made her stomach clench. Maybe, she thought, my therapist was right after all. Maybe I should never have come here.

CHAPTER 4

After a dinner of a baked potato (easy to cook in the microwave), frozen broccoli (ditto) and a muffin (a day-old she had picked up at the diner for half price), Thea poured a glass of red wine and placed it on the small table next to the chintz-covered chair. She would attempt to begin the Georgette Heyer book she had intended to read last evening, before that call had made her such a nervous wreck; Thea had done that to herself. It wasn't what happened to you, her therapist had told her repeatedly as she struggled through the worst of the divorce and its immediate aftermath. It was how you decided to react to what had happened that mattered. It was good advice but difficult to put into action.

Before Thea could settle into the comfortable chair with her wine and her book, an impulse sent her into the bedroom. She hadn't brought much with her to Ogunquit—an adequate supply of clothing; a bathing suit, though she had no real plan to use it as she didn't like the idea of spending time on the beach by herself; a selection of

favorite books, of course, and one precious piece of her long-distant past.

Thea opened the second drawer of the painted wood dresser and removed a square, purple velvet box. Inside was a painted miniature of Napoleon, with the emperor's authenticated signature on the back. Hugh Landry, her first and greatest love, had given it to her for her sixteenth birthday. He had found it at an antique shop on Beacon Hill in Boston. Thea's parents had urged her to return the gift; they thought it was "too much." But Thea had refused. It was the most special thoughtful thing anyone had ever given her. Once she had begun to suspect Mark of double-dealing, she had put the miniature in a private safety deposit box in a bank different from the one where they had their joint accounts. To imagine Hugh Landry's gift being callously sold for someone else's profit was a horror.

In light of what had happened in her brief marriage, Thea was glad that she had hidden the miniature away. Now, it was with her again, nestled in its velvet box and tucked into a pile of underwear and T-shirts when it wasn't in her hand, being gazed upon. Though selling it would help her immediate financial situation, Thea knew she could never bring herself to part with it. The engagement and wedding rings Mark had given her had gone long ago, as had her car and her condo. The miniature was here to stay.

Thea carefully closed the lid of the purple velvet box and returned it to its hiding place. She went back to the living room and its comfortable chintz-covered chair. She opened the Georgette Heyer novel but only a few pages in she realized she was still too distracted to read. Her mind seemed determined to reminisce about the giver of that special gift.

Hugh Landry was everything a young girl could have wanted in a boyfriend—handsome, friendly, popular, and smart. More importantly, he had been everything Thea herself could have wanted in a soul mate. He understood and appreciated her for who she was, not for who he wanted her to be. That, alone, in a teenage boy, was a remarkable thing. Though he was a star on the football team, he never

pressured her to go to his games like the other players expected their girlfriends to. He knew she wasn't interested in sports; he liked the fact that she was her own person and chose to stay at home and read books about European history or "cozy" mysteries set in England manor houses rather than cheer in the stands.

Thea was suddenly aware of Alice's footfalls upstairs, moving from her living room to her kitchen. She wondered about her own future; she wondered if she would be living alone in her fifties, like Alice was. The prospect didn't seem so awful, certainly a lot better than living with an abuser, a liar, and a cheat. And if she could be like Alice, self-sufficient and, as Alice had said, reasonably happy, a solitary life might be just fine. Even though Alice had admitted she would like to be in a relationship, her life still had great value and she seemed to know that.

Alice must have settled down somewhere because her footsteps ceased. Thea looked at the book in her lap. That was the problem, she thought. Learning how to become self-sufficient and relatively happy, both of which she had been back when she had been dating Hugh Landry, and both of which she had been for all of the years before her marriage.

Which didn't mean that several times during those self-sufficient and relatively happy years she hadn't considered contacting Hugh, but for a variety of reasons—the fear of rejection being one of them; another being the promise she had made to him in her final letter—she had dismissed the idea. Besides, it was unlikely a new reality could ever equal the perfection of the old memory. Distortions were normal; maybe the Hugh of her memory didn't really exist; maybe he never really had. Besides, there was every chance that a man like Hugh Landry was either married or engaged or soon to be. And there was every chance that he was a father, responsible for his family, and not interested in being bothered by a long-ago girlfriend. Thea wasn't sure she could handle seeing a happy family picture posted on Facebook or wherever she would find Hugh Landry. Especially not now, in her vulnerable state. She didn't begrudge Hugh whatever happiness he

had found, but she wasn't sure she wanted to be confronted with that happiness.

Thea took an appreciative sip of the wine that had been sitting untouched. She suspected the only reason she was thinking so much about Hugh these days was because she was in this unique situation—divorced, virtually friendless, somewhat estranged from her parents, who were her entire family, and on hiatus from what had become a fraught career, through no fault of her own. Well, that could be debated. She had quit her job as a high school French teacher, if not happily, at Mark's request. He hadn't put a gun to her head; not literally, at least.

Thea took another sip of wine and then another and firmly put all thoughts of Hugh Landry and of Mark Marais to the side. With only a few false starts, she finally managed to engage in *No Wind of Blame*. Former chorus girl and wealthy widow Ermytrude Carter was a vastly amusing character, with her flamboyant but good-natured behavior, as was her daughter, Vicky, a pretty and determinedly theatrical young woman who changed costumes and personas as the mood struck her, which could be several times a day. Knowing in advance “who done it” was no obstacle to the fun of following the investigation through to the remarkable conclusion. Halfway through the novel and all thoughts not associated with the murder of the charming loser Wally Carter had flown far, far away.

CHAPTER 5

Shortly after a breakfast of bad coffee and cold cereal Wednesday morning, Thea left the house to tramp through the fields surrounding Alice's house. Not far into her ramble she encountered Alice's calico cat, a large, ill-tempered beast named Henrietta, who ostentatiously ignored Thea in spite of her attempts to coax the kitty for some stroking. With a flash of her white-tipped tail, Henrietta was over the old stonewall that snaked across the backfield and out of sight. Probably chasing chipmunks, Thea surmised. The area was full of them, chipmunks and squirrels and roly-poly hedgehogs and more varieties of birds than she could possibly name. There was a bird identification book in the apartment and Thea had made good use of it in the short time she had been in residence, but she still had a lot to learn.

She breathed in the air that smelled ever so slightly of the sea.

The best thing about being "in Nature" was that there was no way she would ever run into Mark Marais. She smiled at the thought of his twisting his ankle on a rotted tree root or frantically swatting away nonexistent bugs. Compared to Mark, Thea was Mountain Girl and Grizzly Adams rolled into one. One time, early in their courtship, Thea had suggested a walk through a popular suburban park. Still playing the obliging suitor, Mark had readily agreed. But in spite of the wide, flat, well-cared for trail, Mark had managed to fall twice, tearing the knee of his chinos; be struck with a sneezing attack in the vicinity of a stand of pines; and come down later that afternoon with a particularly ugly-looking rash on his hands and arms. At the time, Thea thought Mark's willingness to endure such trials for her sake gallant. Only much later did she see that "willingness" for what it really was: calculation.

What had begun as a restorative morning ramble suddenly morphed into a sinister episode as Thea was startled by a powerful mental image. Mark's face slammed its way into her consciousness, obliterating the velvety moss-covered boulders and the delicate sprays of Queen Anne's lace, blocking out the stands of lush, green ferns and the rough sculptures made by fallen branches. Mark's sneering face, his expression one of superiority and deep disdain. Mark mocking her stupidity. And then, as suddenly as it had come, the image was gone.

Thea stumbled to a halt, physically affected by the vision. She no longer felt safe all alone and out of earshot of Alice's few distant neighbors. She turned and half ran back to the house, small rocks flying up under her heels, tiny wildflowers crushed underfoot. The sudden scream of a blue jay almost sent her to her knees. Once inside her apartment, she carefully locked the door behind her and went to the kitchen sink for a glass of water. The past, at least her recent past, was a menace. She wondered if she would ever be done with it.

Now it was a little after noon and Thea was headed into town to pick up her check at the diner. The task could have waited until her next shift, but the nasty image of her former husband had decided her against staying alone in the house; Alice had driven off before Thea had gone out to walk and she had no idea of when Alice would be back. Not that town was necessarily any safer should Mark decide to make an actual appearance outside of her imagination, but there were more people she could call to for help. She knew it was ridiculous to be living her life this way, in fear and trembling, but she clung to the hope that time would do what it was supposed to do and heal her wounds. For the moment she would keep her head down, scrape together what living she could, and keep fantasies of Mark's revenge at bay.

Once inside the diner she greeted her colleague Louise, a single mother of two. Louise also worked part-time for a local woman who made exquisite floral arrangements for weddings and other special occasions.

“I came by for my check,” Thea told Louise. “I’m sorry to come at such a busy time. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Not a problem,” Louise said, her usual imperturbable self. “I’ll get your check for you, honey.”

Louise hurried off to the office behind the kitchen and Thea scanned the diner. Really, it was thoughtless of her to have come by at lunchtime, chased out of her own home by what amounted to a ghost. Every stool at the counter was occupied, as was every table up front. Thea glanced to the back of the diner. Yes, every booth, too, was occupied, including the very back booth, though it was occupied by only one person. A man...

It couldn’t be. Thea blinked, shook her head, did all the ridiculous things a person does automatically when she saw or thought she saw the impossible. But it wasn’t a hallucination. It was Hugh Landry, in the flesh, sipping from a thick white china cup.

Thea knew she could be a bit superstitious; she also knew that it wasn’t one of her best character traits. But still, how odd was it that just last night she had sat reminiscing about her first great love and now Hugh was here, as if summoned by her memories...

That’s ridiculous, Thea told herself, clutching the straps of her brown leather bag more tightly. But...really, what were the odds of Hugh Landry being in this little town at this little diner, at the very moment she was coming for her paycheck?

Thea had a strong urge to turn and run out of the diner, paycheck be damned. But she found that she couldn’t move a muscle. And then Hugh Landry lifted the cup in front of him again, took a sip, and over the thick, white rim, his eyes found Thea. She might have smiled; she wasn’t sure. Hugh put down the cup with a bit of a clatter and definitely did smile. She found herself walking back to his table and just standing there, looking down at him.

Neither made a move to touch, to kiss, to hug, or even to shake hands. Thea felt just like she had the day Hugh had come to sit by her in history class. Overwhelmed. Slightly dizzy. Disbelieving. Could this be, she thought, my mind playing a trick on me?

Hugh found his voice first. “Thea. Wow. Sit down, please.”

She slid into the booth as if in a trance. “I can’t believe this,” she said finally, her voice sounding a bit weak in her ears. “I can’t believe it’s you. That’s such a clichéd thing to say. I’m sorry.”

“Clichés are what’s called for in a moment like this,” Hugh said, shaking his head. “I feel the same way. Stunned. Well, I’ll be a monkey’s uncle. You could knock me over with a feather.”

Thea laughed and hoped she didn’t sound as slightly hysterical as she felt. “What are you doing here?” she asked. “I mean, what are you doing in Ogunquit? Are you on vacation?”

“First things first,” he said. “I just ordered lunch. Are you hungry?”

Thea was suddenly aware of being ravenous---no Alice-made breakfast this morning—and asked Louise, who had appeared as if on cue, an inquisitive grin on her face and paycheck in mind, for a tuna salad sandwich on white toast and a cup of tea. When Louise had gone off, Thea had a sudden vivid memory of sharing nachos with Hugh during the summer before college at a chain restaurant in their town. Every Tuesday night, without fail, they would order a large plate of nachos, extra jalapenos on the side for her, followed by a brownie sundae. She wondered if Hugh remembered that magical, bittersweet summer.

“Now, to your question,” Hugh said, “I was visiting friends in Boston, and I just thought, why not drive north for a few days before heading back home to New York. I’ve lived in the city since graduate school at Columbia.”

“Oh,” Thea said. “But why did you choose Ogunquit and not someplace else? Why, she thought, the place that I just happen to be hiding out from my life?”

Hugh shrugged. “I’d been here about a million years ago and remembered it as being really beautiful. Seriously, I’m staying in a bed-and-breakfast right out of a picture book. If it was any more charming I’d choke on the sweetness.”

“Charming isn’t too hard to find here. Is your...I mean, are you traveling alone?”

“Yeah,” Hugh said. “I’m single at the moment. I’ve been divorced for almost nine years. I came close to getting married again a few years back, but—“ Hugh smiled a bit and shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. Nothing came of it.”

“I’m sorry,” Thea said, and she was. And she wasn’t.

“No need to be. So, what are you doing here in Ogunquit?”

Thea hesitated and concentrated on folding the edge of her white paper napkin, over and over. “There’s kind of a long and complicated answer to that question,” she said finally, looking back to Hugh.

“Short, uncomplicated version?”

“I guess you could say I’m taking a break from things after my divorce.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Hugh said feelingly. “I mean, divorce is never pleasant, but I hope it was for the best.”

“Unquestionably.”

“Good.”

Their sandwiches arrived. Hugh had ordered a turkey club; Thea remembered it had been one of his favorites back in high school. While they ate, they exchanged more basic information. Hugh told her about his career; he was a CEO of a company that designed and manufactured sets for theaters around the world. Thea told him about her career as a high school French teacher; she chose not to mention the very different job she eventually had taken on Mark’s demand. Neither had children. Yes, both had read about the death due to cancer of a former classmate a few years back. No, neither had gone to the last reunion of their high school. Although the content of the conversation was mundane, Thea felt herself to be in a sort of dream state. In spite of the evidence to the contrary, she still could not entirely believe that she was sitting across the table from her first love.

But at the same time she felt disoriented, she felt oddly comfortable. It was almost as if nothing had changed since they had

last seen each other. Hugh had hardly changed at all. His hair was as thick and dark as ever, a brown that was almost black. His eyes—oh, how she had always loved his eyes!—were still so very, very brown and the little lines around them somehow only added to their beauty. His hands—well, aside from a small scar on the left hand—were still strong and nicely manicured. His shoulders were still broad, his smile still big.

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