



Return To Me free excerpt

Return to Me

By

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Chapter One

I saw her for the first time down on Cape Cod on one of those lazy, hazy days of summer from which tourists and locals alike seek relief by heading to the nearest beach. In my case it happened to be the one at Paine's Creek in Brewster, one of those rare gems on the Cape that the hordes of summer visitors have yet to overrun. I had just come back up to the parking lot from taking a swim and was toweling myself off when I happened to glance up.

She was sitting on a lounge chair, gazing down at the beach below. Long black hair cascaded over the back of her chair and the pink ribbon on her broad-brimmed straw hat and light summer dress fluttered seductively in the gentle summer breeze. Even though I didn't know what she looked like--aviator sunglasses and the brim of the hat hid her face--there was something about her that drew me irresistibly to her. Suddenly, as if sensing my scrutiny, she turned and, for a fleeting moment, our eyes met before hers broke away and resumed their watch upon the beach below.

Since that July was warmer and drier than usual, I would bicycle down there every day between one and three as much as to catch another glimpse of her as to take a swim. And I usually did because she, too, had

fallen in love with the place even if it was, as I was later to learn, for different reasons. Like me, being a creature of habit, she could be found sitting on the same chair at the same spot during the same hours.

While I was trying to find a way to wangle an introduction--without, of course, making a fool of myself-- Mother Nature gave me the opportunity I was looking for. It came in the form of a gust of wind which picked up her straw hat and carried it down to the beach below. Instinctively I was on my feet and racing down to retrieve it. When I got back and, breathlessly, handed it to her, she pushed aside some errant strands of hair and looked up at me over the top of her sunglasses. "Thanks, you didn't have to do that," she said in a soft, sincere voice.

"Oh, no problem," I replied with a pretense of nonchalance. After that I don't know how long I stood there, tongue-tied, before I broke the awkward silence. "My name's Jack Roberts," I said, extending my hand which she took like a present she didn't know what to do with, "I'm down here for the summer."

The pregnant pause that followed made it obvious she had no intention of giving me her name. "Nice to meet you," she replied and, with those words, got up, folded her chair, and turned to leave.

I took a step toward her and, then, thought better of it, saying feebly, "Perhaps we'll see one another again."

"Perhaps," she replied with a fleeting backward glance.

The lack of enthusiasm in her response didn't go unnoticed but I shrugged it off. I don't know how long I stood, rooted there, and watched resignedly as she wended her way down a well-worn path and disappeared among the sand dunes. When at last I climbed onto my bicycle for the return trip home, I found myself taking one last look at the dunes but she was nowhere to be seen. "At least I got an introduction," I murmured, pedaling slowly away, "and one thing's for sure, she's staying in one of the summer homes nearby."

The following day all I got from her was a nod. And the next one wasn't much better: I had to settle for a terse "Hi."

When it comes to looks, I'm no Tom Cruise but neither am I the son of Frankenstein. I'm somewhere in between. If I have a crooked nose-- thanks to an errant hockey puck--and big ears, I've also got curly blond hair and sloe-blue eyes, all of which rest upon a trim, muscular frame that I've always meticulously maintained by jogging, bicycling, and swimming.

At the risk of appearing to brag I can honestly say that, whenever it came to social events like dances or proms, more often than not, I was the hunted, not the hunter. So it goes without saying that if her rejection of me didn't shatter my ego, it certainly damaged it. All the more so because intuitively I felt that she was someone special--perhaps even the one I had been waiting for forever.

If I wasn't exactly a disbeliever in the role that fate or destiny plays in our lives, I was at least a skeptic. However, several days after she had given me the cold-shoulder--or at least what I perceived to be such--an incident occurred which would forever turn me into an ardent believer. That afternoon--another in a string of July scorchers--I had gone into the water for my daily swim. Since I was an accomplished swimmer, it wasn't unusual for me to end up fifty feet off shore. On this occasion I am sure I was beyond even that when suddenly I heard a voice off to the right of me, hollering, "Help me; somebody, please help me!"

I turned and saw the head of a sandy-haired, freckle-faced teenager bobbing up and down as he whizzed past me. Realizing the seriousness of his plight--he was caught in a rip tide--I quickly swam over to it and soon found myself also within its grip and being swept out behind him. "Swim sideways and you'll get free of it!" I yelled.

Either he didn't hear me or, in a panic, was too busy trying, in vain, to get back to shore, his arms all the while flailing away like a windmill gone amok. I knew only too well that all this effort would do was exhaust him.

Fortunately just as I was getting close to him, both of us were thrown free of it. "Okay," I said, trying to reassure him, "now let's start swimming toward shore."

He took a few strokes and, then, glassy-eyed and dazed, muttered, "I--I

can't go on."

Alarmed at the sound of resignation in his voice, I found myself protesting vigorously, "Of course you can." With those words I reached across with my right arm and seized him by the neck, all the while holding his chin above water, and with the other one struggled to propel both of us shoreward.

After what seemed an eternity a lifeguard along with some swimmers reached us and, pulling his limp body from my grasp, managed to get him onto a floating sled and drag him back to shore. When at last my feet touched the bottom, I staggered onto the beach and dropped down onto my knees, exhausted and gasping for breath.

Meanwhile a bunch of good Samaritans had crowded around the teenager who was lying down, motionless, on the sand across from me. Foremost among them was the pretty brunette, who, in an uncharacteristic way, had cast aside both her hat and glasses and hurried over to take matters into her own hands. On her knees leaning over him, she was administering mouth to mouth resuscitation and, at that moment, I think I would've willingly changed places with him if only to feel the caress of her hair upon my chest.

When, at last, I saw him moving, I breathed a sigh of relief. Not long afterwards an ambulance arrived, took him aboard, and raced off toward the Cape Cod Hospital. Still weary, I lay down on the beach and closed

my eyes. When at last I opened them again, she--her sunglasses and hat back in place--was hovering above me. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"I'll live." As I struggled to my feet, I could feel her hand on my arm and, as if touched by a magic wand, I immediately felt better. "How's he doing?" I asked, gesturing to the spot where he had lain.

"He'll live, too," she said, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth, "thanks to you."

"From what I just saw, you're the one who deserves the thanks," I replied, returning her compliment.

Unfortunately our conversation came to an abrupt end as a roly-poly man with bulbous eyes and a scimitar-like nose--the latter made to order for sticking into other people's business--came waddling over. "What you two did today was wonderful," he gushed, trying in vain to loosen the string on the bathing suit that was much too small for him.. "I'm going to see that you get the recognition you deserve in the Cape Cod Times." Brandishing a small notebook and pencil, he turned to her and said, "Now what's your name?"

She froze but quickly recovered, replying, "There's no need to make a fuss, I only did what anyone else would've done in a similar situation. The important thing is that the boy's going to be all right."

With those words she turned and walked briskly back to her lounge chair, leaving him bewildered and disappointed. "What's her name?" he

asked, turning his attention to me.

“Beats me,” I said, throwing up my hands, “I wish I knew.”

“She’s either a nurse or a doctor.”

“Oh?” My ears suddenly perked up, “What makes you say that?”

“She sure as heck knew what she was doing over there,” he said, successfully loosening the string on his bathing suit and giving his stomach more breathing room.

“Yes, it appears she did,” I murmured, glancing up and catching sight of her stealing away once again, chair in hand.

“She was so camera shy, she ran off and left her towel there,” he said gesturing with his hand. As I moved off to retrieve it, he demanded, “Where are you going?” When I didn’t answer, he hollered after me, “Hey, you haven’t given me your name, either.”

“Just call me Sir Galahad,” I replied, picking up the towel and glancing back at him in one motion, “I’m on my way to do a good deed.”

“But you’ve already done one.”

“Ah, but this one involves a fair damsel.” With a mock bow, I, too beat a hasty retreat.

Up in the parking lot I searched the dunes for another glimpse of her-- all in vain. Once again she had vanished as quickly as she had appeared. As I climbed onto my bike and began to pedal away, holding on to the towel for dear life, I couldn’t help but chuckle at the roly-poly one who

remained back on the beach, shaking his head and brandishing the pencil.

“Cinderella and Cinderfella--a plague on both your houses,” he fumed.

That night I washed and folded the towel and, on a whim, neatly wrapped a pink ribbon--identical to the one on her straw hat--around it. Since I had been unsuccessful so far in gaining her favor, when I returned it to her the next day, I would do so with a touch of humor.

The next morning, however, because of a faulty circulator and heavy carbon buildup, what I had thought would be a routine service call to inspect my furnace turned out to be an all-day affair. So, late that afternoon I found myself pedaling furiously down to Paine’s Creek. Arriving there just as she was leaving, I bounded over and, handed her the towel. “Your towel, my lady,” I said with a sweeping bow.

I should’ve known by the look in her eyes what a terrible blunder I had committed but, instead, made it even more so by going on in a falsetto voice,

“Have no fear, Lady Guenievre,

Sir Galahad’s always near.”

She burst out laughing and, mistakenly assuming that my humor had been a roaring success, I joined in with her. But so heartily and so long did she do so that I found myself saying self-deprecatingly, “Apparently I’ll never make a living as a poet.”

“It’s got nothing to do with your poetry,” she replied, her laughter

reaching a crescendo, “it’s the towel.”

“The towel?” I repeated, almost as if sensing what was to come.

“Yes,” she replied with a wag of her head, “it’s not mine.”

Embarrassed and at a loss for words, I now knew first hand what it felt like to be a laughingstock. Meanwhile she hurried off, taking her mirth along with her.

The following day--a Saturday--it was drizzling. Although I was disappointed not to be able to go to the beach, reluctantly I accepted the rainfall as a necessary evil, the month of July, so far, having been one of the driest on record. So it was I found myself doing what most Cape Codders do on rainy days--shopping.

I have a weakness for Cape Cod potato chips which I consider the most delicious of all the brands--probably because they’re made with a secret ingredient called “salt air.” I was standing in the aisle of the supermarket trying to make one of the most momentous decisions of my life--whether to buy my favorite, the barbecue kind, or try a new flavor. Someone once said--I think it was Ralph Waldo Emerson--that a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds and, of course, the last thing I wanted to be accused of was having a little mind. As I was reaching across for a bag of dill-pickled ones, suddenly I was struck from behind--so forcefully that the impact sent me sprawling onto the floor.

“Oh, I’m awfully sorry.” With those words I felt an arm on mine,

helping me to my feet. I shook it off and got up, breathing fire and brimstone. When I whirled around to confront my assailant, we both recoiled and gasped in unison, “Oh, no.”

Standing before me with a shopping cart between us was none other than the Florence Nightingale from Paine’s Creek Beach. Up close, without the aviator sunglasses and straw hat, she was even more beautiful than I had envisioned. Her long black hair, held in place with a leather thong, steel-rimmed glasses framing dark, intelligent eyes, and a trace of that bewitching smile gave her Asian face a warm and inviting look. Recovering more quickly than she from the shock of our chance encounter, I put on a mask of seriousness. “I know you weren’t thrilled about our first meeting at the Paine’s Creek Beach,” I said, “and that towel thing didn’t help matters any, that’s for sure.” A smile crossed her lips at my use of the word, towel. “But never, in my wildest dreams, did I think you’d try to do me in,” I chided, “and with a shopping cart, no less.”

“You’ll have to forgive me,” she said with a blend of humor and embarrassment.

“Only if you agree to go out to dinner with me,” I replied, trying to keep a straight face.

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” she replied, wavering and turning more serious again.

“Either you’re going out with me or I’m going to press charges against you for driving a shopping cart so as to endanger,” I persisted. “And I have the bruises to prove it.” I paused and, pointing to my back, said, “Would you like to see them?”

“No, I don’t think that’ll be necessary.” Again she was smiling--and more brightly so. “I’m afraid you don’t leave me much choice.”

“Good,” I replied, scarcely able to conceal my eagerness, “now that we’ve settled that, where do you want to eat?”

She hesitated, stroking her chin thoughtfully. “How about Kate’s?” she said at last.

“The outdoor restaurant on Paine’s Creek Road?”

“Yes.” My lack of enthusiasm at her choice didn’t go unnoticed.

“You’d rather go someplace else?” she asked.

“No, of course not.” Her dark eyes were studying me intently and I found myself confessing, “The truth is I was hoping to impress you by taking you somewhere fit for a queen.”

I shall never forget the look of anxiety on her face or the quiver which went coursing through her slender frame that those words wrought but, just as quickly as the sun bursts forth from behind a passing storm cloud, she recovered and said, “Well, you have nothing to fear, I’m easily impressed.”

“Hey,” I quipped, “I don’t know quite how to take that.”

“A poor choice of words on my part,” she replied, smiling to herself as she spoke. “I should’ve said, ‘I’m already impressed.’”

“Well, that’s a lot better.” I wiped my brow in a pretense of relief.

“Then, if it’s all right with you,” she said, breaking another one of those awkward silences, “we’ll eat at Kate’s?”

“It’s fine with me.”

“How’s tomorrow at seven o’clock sound?” she asked.

“Great,” I enthused, “where will I pick you up?”

Quickly, she brought my soaring spirits crashing back down to earth.

“You won’t,” she said brusquely, “I’ll meet you there.”

Although I was disappointed by her response--I was anxious to find out where she was staying--nevertheless, I was delighted that at least she’d agreed to go out with me. So, for now I resigned myself to making haste slowly.

“Is that okay with you?” she asked, jolting me out of my reverie.

“Yes,” I replied with a nod of approval.

She took hold of her shopping cart and, as she was about to walk away, said, “I’m sorry for running into you like that.”

“Well, I’m not.”

The veiled meaning in my words didn’t go unnoticed and, smiling, she replied, “See you tomorrow.”

“You can bet on it,” I retorted. She started to move off and I found

myself reaching for her arm. “Excuse--excuse me,” I stammered, “but I just realized I don’t even know your name.”

Slowly she turned and faced me again and, after what seemed an eternity, replied, “Nora-- why don’t you just call me Nora.” While I was wondering what else I would’ve called her, she said, “And you’re Jack. Jack Roberts, isn’t it?”

So elated was I that she had remembered my name, I was rendered momentarily speechless. Maybe, I mused, things weren’t as bad as I had initially thought.

With a cursory “Ciao,” she turned and began to push the carriage down the aisle.

As I watched her disappear around the corner, I couldn’t help but notice that she looked just as good from the rear as she did from the front. Since potato chips were now the last thing on my mind, I literally danced my way out of the store and, outside in the parking lot, in my jubilation, broke out into song. Several passersby, upon seeing and hearing me, raised an eyebrow or shook a head but I could’ve cared less, for at that moment she was all I was thinking about.