

A woman in a patterned top and dark pants is walking on a beach. In the background, a blurry figure stands on the beach near the water's edge. The scene is captured in a soft, slightly desaturated light.

The Woman
Who Loved
a Ghost

QUICKREADS

JANET LORIMER



Alex stared as the huge green waves rose like sea monsters before crashing to the sand in pools of foam. Their thunder beat against her ears.

She had always loved listening to the thunder of the waves. The rhythm was strangely hypnotic. But today she also heard another sound—one that had haunted her for months. It was the scream of grinding, tearing metal. Soon it grew so loud that it drowned out the noise of the waves.

Alex clapped her hands over her ears, even though she knew that the horrible sounds were *inside* her head. “Stop, please stop! Those sounds will drive me mad!” she

thought miserably.

“Alex. Alexandra!” Alex turned and saw her cousin Miranda gesturing impatiently.

Alex took a deep breath of cool, salty air and started back up the beach. Miranda looked excited. “Good news!” she shouted. “You can rent the cottage!”

Alex gazed at her cousin in surprise. “Really? Just like that?”

Miranda’s eyes were sparkling. “It’s off-season. Mrs. Hansen was delighted to get a tenant this time of year.”

Alex turned to study the small gray cottage next to Miranda’s house. It was certainly charming. “But is this what’s best for me?” she wondered. “After everything that’s happened—”

She felt Miranda’s hand on her arm.

“I know you’re wondering if this is a wise move,” Miranda said. “I think it is. You have to live somewhere while you recuperate. This cottage is as good a place as any. In fact, it’s *perfect!* You’ll have your privacy—but I’ll be close by if you need me.” She held up a key.

“Shall we go inside and take a look now?”

Alex nodded.

“The doctor says a lot of walking would do you good,” Miranda went on. “You can have the beach all to yourself. This time of year you can walk for miles without seeing a soul! We’re close to town, and you can use my car if—”

Miranda broke off too late. Alex’s face had crumpled. She burst into tears.

Miranda put her arms around her cousin. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “That was thoughtless. I can drive you to the store, Alex. Or you can have groceries delivered. You—” She broke off in frustration. “Oh, dear. I just seem to be making it worse, don’t I?”

Alex drew back, wiping away her tears. “It’s not your fault, Miranda. It’s me—just me. It’s already been months, but I still can’t seem to get over it. People have to deal with tragedies every day. What’s wrong with *me*?”

By now, they had almost reached the gray cottage. “There’s nothing wrong with you,” Miranda said softly. “Nothing that time won’t

heal. Don't forget that you lost someone who was very dear to you, someone—”

Again she broke off too late. She saw Alex grit her teeth, trying to hold back the tears. As if trying to escape her pain, Alex plunged ahead on the path.

Miranda followed, wondering in despair if Alex would ever be able to talk about it. Alex's fiancé Steven had been killed in the car accident. The doctor said that the sooner Alex faced her loss and talked about it, the sooner she would begin to heal. But Alex showed no signs of even accepting Steven's death.

Alex reached the stairs that led up to the veranda of the cottage. She turned to smile at her cousin. “These stairs will give me plenty of exercise,” she said as they started up.

Miranda was glad to change the subject. “Look, Alex. You'll have a fantastic view from here,” she said.

Inside the cottage, they moved from room to room looking the place over.

“Mrs. Hansen's cleaning woman will come

in tomorrow morning,” Miranda explained. “After that, it’s all ready! Everything is here—linens, dishes—”

But Alex wasn’t listening. An oil painting over the stone fireplace had caught her attention.

It was the portrait of a handsome young man in his late twenties. He had dark brown hair and green eyes that matched the color of the sea. The handsome young man seemed to be gazing right at her. She could almost hear him saying, “I know all your secrets!” Alex felt a slight shudder run down her spine.

She turned away from the portrait and smiled at her cousin. “Who’s the guy in the picture?” she asked.

Miranda shrugged. “I have no idea. Probably someone Mrs. Hansen knows. He’s a good-looking guy, huh?”

Then Alex noticed something. For the first time in months, she couldn’t hear the sounds in her head.



Two days later, Alex moved into the cottage. She brought very little with her. “After the accident, I got rid of many of my things,” she told Miranda. “They reminded me of—”

She broke off before mentioning Steven’s name.

“I never really knew what happened that day,” Miranda said gently. “What led up to . . .” Hoping Alex would continue, she let her words trail away.

Alex turned pale. “*Nothing!* We had an accident. St—St—He’s dead!” She burst into tears and ran out of the room.

Miranda slumped back into her chair. “I’ve got to be patient. The poor girl needs more time,” she thought sadly.

When Alex returned, Miranda tried to apologize. Alex stopped her. “No, *I’m* the problem,” Alex said in a shaky voice. “I know I’ve got to face what happened—but I just can’t do it right now.”

After her cousin left, Alex built a fire in the fireplace. Before long the crackling blaze heated the room. Alex made a cup of tea and carried it into the living room. She curled up in a comfortable armchair and gazed into the flames.

Then something made her look up. The man in the painting seemed to be studying her. Alex looked away. But his green eyes and secretive smile again sent a little chill down her spine.

“Oh, for crying out loud!” she scolded herself. “It’s only a picture!”

That night she dreamed she was walking along the beach. Just ahead, she saw the figure of a man, his back turned to her. Something about the man seemed familiar. The next thing she knew she was calling out Steven’s name.

She ran toward the man. But just as she reached him, he turned toward her. She was looking into the deep green eyes of the man in the portrait!

Awakening with a start, Alex sat up. The

strange dream had left her shaking from head to toe!



Alex went to the kitchen and warmed a cup of milk. She hoped it would help her get back to sleep. While she waited for the milk to heat, she peered out the window. A layer of dark, angry clouds partly masked the moon.

She drank her milk slowly, listening to the wind rise. “Sounds like we’re in for a storm,” she thought to herself.

She felt a stab of disappointment and sighed. She’d hoped to go for a long walk in the morning. Then she remembered that storms often bring strange and wonderful things to shore. “Maybe I’ll find some pretty shells tomorrow,” she told herself. “Or some interesting pieces of driftwood.” She went back to bed.

When she awoke, Alex was happy to see the sun was shining. After lashing the sea and land for a few hours, the storm had worn itself out.

She had a quick breakfast and then hurried down to the shore. Sure enough, there was lots of driftwood. Bits of pretty shells and pebbles lay tangled in strands of wet seaweed.

Alex followed the line of ocean debris down the beach. Before long, her pockets were filled with treasures. Among other things, she'd found a sand dollar and several pieces of green glass, frosted by the waves.

Then a quick movement made Alex look up. A man stood on the beach about 20 feet away from her, staring out over the water. Why did his face look so familiar? Alex frowned, trying to imagine where she'd met him.

Suddenly, the memory of last night's dream flashed into her mind. Her breath caught in her throat. She tried to steady herself. It couldn't be! And yet—

As if drawn by a magnet, Alex took a step toward the man—then another and another. She'd almost closed the distance between them when he turned. She stopped abruptly,