

One

The large manila envelope had arrived in the mail yesterday, two days before Christmas. It was hand-addressed, not computer-printed, and even though there was no return address on the package Rebecca Halsey realized at once who the envelope was from. It seemed to her a lifetime -- *another life, almost* -- since she last had seen that handwriting.

Rebecca had not opened the thick, 8x10-sized envelope at first -- but instead had put it away until today. Now, with William out for the afternoon on last-minute Holiday errands, she was home by herself. She took the envelope from the bureau drawer where she had secreted it yesterday under some linen before William might see it among the Christmas cards and the rest of the mail.

She considered for a moment but could not imagine why Thomas would be communicating with her again after all these years. Last night before drifting off to sleep, with William beside her, she had not been able to get thoughts of Thomas out of her mind -- and, because of William, she had felt guilty about that.

But, guilt feelings or not, Rebecca had also looked forward

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to this afternoon, when she knew William had plans to be out of the house and she would be alone for a period of time and have an opportunity to see just what might be in the very bulky envelope Thomas had sent her.

Rebecca sat down and held the package, turning it over in her hands, now more conscious of its girth than she had been yesterday. She began, very deliberately, to open it. She paused for a moment and smiled to herself as she realized how slowly and carefully she was proceeding. *Why* was she being so slow and deliberate -- and why so fastidious in trying not to tear the envelope as she opened it? Did she really want to see and read what was in it, or was she delaying opening it because she did *not* want to see or read its contents.

And why, for that matter, had she put the envelope away yesterday to keep William (who, after all, knew about her past relationship with Thomas) from seeing it? One reason, she knew, was so that she'd be able to open the envelope and examine its contents by herself, without William beside her or looking over her shoulder. She wanted that privacy. But *why* did she want to exclude William? She could not answer that question satisfactorily.

Rebecca held the envelope in her hands and carefully withdrew its contents. Her eyes rested on the typewritten first page of the mass of material she took from the envelope. *Good Lord*, she thought, *There must be two hundred pages here.*

Two

Rebecca's eyes rested on the first page of the thick sheaf in her lap.

Rebecca did not focus on or immediately begin to read the material. For a brief moment her thoughts turned to another place and time and to what she and Thomas had shared so long ago. She continued for still another moment to gaze straight ahead distractedly. Fleeting memories of that long-ago time in her life, before meeting Thomas and then when she was with him, after she and Arthur had separated and subsequently divorced, reemerged.

She thought for another moment about the sheer emotional intensity and turbulence of that period of her life, almost shuddering as she did so.

After Arthur, what she and Thomas had, for as long as it lasted, *was* rich, fulsome and good.

A smile crossed Rebecca's face as she thought about and briefly re-lived some of the good times she and Thomas shared. He had been such a welcome relief and pleasurable change from Arthur; he was the rock upon whom she could rely as she and Arthur went through the trials of divorce.

Rebecca smiled, resting her head against the tall back of the comfortable Queen Anne chair in which she sat, her tiny frame nearly lost in the huge chair. When she sat back, her feet were almost a foot from the floor. With ankles crossed, she swung her legs back and forth and wondered again why she hesitated to read the thick sheaf of typewritten material in her lap.

Finally, Rebecca's fingertips began, almost absently, to trace the top page of the material, slowly, lightly, even caressingly. She paused for another long moment and then, abruptly and with resolve, straightened her head and sat upright in the chair.

Stop being so silly, she thought to herself. All of what happened between her and Thomas had been so very, very long ago.

"I am in love with William," she said aloud.

"He is the best thing that *ever* happened to me. And he loves *me* -- very, very much.

"He is kind, caring, thoughtful and absolutely reliable. I know I can always count on him and I know he loves me deeply. I feel his devotion everyday; he demonstrates it in every possible way.

"And he is faithful."

Yes, she thought in utter silence now, *faithful -- above all else, William is faithful.*

But what in the world can this sudden word from Thomas be about? Rebecca wondered again, and why such a long letter -- and why now, after so many years?

She spoke aloud once again. "Well there's only one way to find out, Becky," she said. "Read it."

And so, with William still out of the house on his errands, she began --