

# THE WORDS OF LOVE...

“I am nothing special; of this I am sure. I am a common man with common thoughts, and I’ve led a common life. There are no monuments dedicated to me and my name will soon be forgotten, but I’ve loved another with all my heart and soul, and to me, this has always been enough.”

And so begins one of the most poignant and compelling love stories you will ever read...

## **ALL AMERICA LOVES *THE NOTEBOOK***

“A classic story of love found, lost, and

Night, sleep, death and the stars.

He smiled to himself. For some reason Whitman always reminded him of New Bern, and he was glad he'd come back. Though he'd been away for fourteen years, this was home and he knew a lot of people here, most of them from his youth. It wasn't surprising. Like so many southern towns, the people who lived here never changed, they just grew a bit older.

His best friend these days was Gus, a seventy-year-old black man who lived down the road. They had met a couple of weeks after Noah bought the house, when Gus had shown up with some homemade liquor and Brunswick stew, and the two had spent their first evening together getting drunk and telling stories.

spent their days doing things that were completely new to her. He taught her how to bait a line and fish the shallows for largemouth bass and took her exploring through the backwoods of the Croatan Forest. They rode in canoes and watched summer thunderstorms, and to him it seemed as though they'd always known each other.

But he learned things as well. At the town dance in the tobacco barn, it was she who taught him how to waltz and do the Charleston, and though they stumbled through the first few songs, her patience with him eventually paid off, and they danced together until the music ended. He walked her home afterward, and when they paused on the porch after saying good night, he kissed her for the first time and

haunted now. Haunted by the ghost of her memory. He saw her in Fort Totten Park, their place, every time he walked by. Either sitting on the bench or standing by the gate, always smiling, blond hair softly touching her shoulders, her eyes the color of emeralds. When he sat on the porch at night with his guitar, he saw her beside him, listening quietly as he played the music of his childhood.

He felt the same when he went to Gaston's Drug Store, or to the Masonic theater, or even when he strolled downtown. Everywhere he looked, he saw her image, saw things that brought her back to life.

It was odd, he knew that. He had grown up in New Bern. Spent his first seventeen years here. But when he thought about

different things could have happened, even things she didn't want to consider.

She looked down and saw her hands were shaking, and she laughed to herself. It was strange; she wasn't normally this nervous. Like Lon, she had always been confident, even as a child. She remembered that it had been a problem at times, especially when she dated, because it had intimidated most of the boys her age.

She found her pocketbook and car keys, then picked up the room key. She turned it over in her hand a couple of times, thinking, You've come this far, don't give up now, and almost left then, but instead sat on the bed again. She checked her watch. Almost six o'clock. She knew she had to leave in a few minutes—she didn't

been when it started.

“And here it will end, one way or the other,” she whispered again. She refolded the scrap of paper and put it back, remembering that she had left her parents’ home later that day with the paper so she could cut out the article. She read it again before she went to bed that night, trying to fathom the coincidence, and read it again the next morning as if to make sure the whole thing wasn’t a dream. And now, after three weeks of long walks alone, after three weeks of distraction, it was the reason she’d come.

When asked, she said her erratic behavior was due to stress. It was the perfect excuse; everyone understood, including Lon, and that’s why he hadn’t argued when she’d wanted to get away for

smiled as she walked by, and she could feel his eyes on her as she left and went to her car. She slipped behind the wheel, looked at herself one last time, then started the engine and turned right onto Front Street.

She wasn't surprised that she still knew her way around town so well. Even though she hadn't been here in years, it wasn't large and she navigated the streets easily. After crossing the Trent River on an old-fashioned drawbridge, she turned onto a gravel road and began the final leg of her journey.

It was beautiful here in the low country, as it always had been. Unlike the Piedmont area where she grew up, the land was flat, but it had the same silty, fertile soil that was ideal for cotton and

was, and as they started toward her house a few minutes later, he took her hand in his and she felt the way it warmed her the whole way back.

Another turn in the road and she finally saw it in the distance. The house had changed dramatically from what she remembered. She slowed the car as she approached, turning into the long, tree-lined dirt drive that led to the beacon that had summoned her from Raleigh.

She drove slowly, looking toward the house, and took a deep breath when she saw him on the porch, watching her car. He was dressed casually. From a distance, he looked the same as he had back then. For a moment, when the light from the sun was behind him, he almost seemed to vanish into the scenery.

you look fantastic. You're even prettier now than you were then."

She felt the blood in her face. Just like fourteen years ago.

"Thank you. You look great, too." And he did, no doubt about it. The years had treated him well.

"So what have you been up to? Why are you here?"

His questions brought her back to the present, making her realize what could happen if she wasn't careful. Don't let this get out of hand, she told herself; the longer it goes on, the harder it's going to be. And she didn't want it to get any harder.

But God, those eyes. Those soft, dark eyes.

She turned away and took a deep breath, wondering how to say it, and when

“What is it, Allie?” He turned to her, compelling her to look, but she continued to stare at the house.

“I’m being rather silly, aren’t I?” she asked, trying to smile.

“What do you mean?”

“This whole thing. Showing up out of the blue, not knowing what I want to say. You must think I’m crazy.”

“You’re not crazy,” he said gently. He reached for her hand, and she let him hold it as they stood next to one another. He went on:

“Even though I don’t know why, I can see this is hard for you. Why don’t we go for a walk?”

“Like we used to?”

“Why not? I think we both could use one.”

as though she were gliding. He'd seen beautiful women before, though, women who caught his eye, but to his mind they usually lacked the traits he found most desirable. Traits like intelligence, confidence, strength of spirit, passion, traits that inspired others to greatness, traits he aspired to himself.

Allie had those traits, he knew, and as they walked now, he sensed them once again lingering beneath the surface. "A living poem" had always been the words that came to mind when he tried to describe her to others.

"How long have you been back here?" she asked as the path gave way to a small grass hill.

"Since last December. I worked up north for a while, then spent the last three

dropped a little lower and the sky turned orange, he asked:

“So, how long are you staying?”

“I don’t know. Not long. Maybe until tomorrow or the next day.”

“Is your fiancé here on business?”

She shook her head. “No, he’s still in Raleigh.” Noah raised his eyebrows.

“Does he know you’re here?”

She shook her head again and answered slowly. “No. I told him I was looking for antiques. He wouldn’t understand my coming here.”

Noah was a little surprised by her answer. It was one thing to come and visit, but it was an entirely different matter to hide the truth from her fiancé.

“You didn’t have to come here to tell me you were engaged. You could have

written me instead, or even called.”

“I know. But for some reason, I had to do it in person.”

“Why?”

She hesitated. “I don’t know . . . ,” she said, trailing off, and the way she said it made him believe her. The gravel crunched beneath their feet as they walked in silence for a few steps. Then he asked:

“Allie, do you love him?”

She answered automatically. “Yes, I love him.” The words hurt. But again, he thought he heard something in her tone, as if she were saying it to convince herself. He stopped and gently took her shoulders in his hands, making her face him. The fading sunlight reflected in her eyes as he spoke.

“If you’re happy, Allie, and you love

was common when homes like this were rebuilt.

“Do you mind if I look around?”

“No, go ahead. I did some shopping earlier, and I still have to put the groceries away.”

Their eyes met for a second, and Allie knew as she turned that he continued to watch her as she left the room. Inside she felt that little twitch again.

She toured the house for the next few minutes, walking through the rooms, noticing how wonderful it looked. By the time she'd finished, it was hard to remember how run-down it had been. She came down the stairs, turned toward the kitchen, and saw his profile. For a second he looked like a young man of seventeen again, and it made her pause a split

was almost finished.

“Good. I’m almost done here. Anything else for dinner?”

“I have some homemade bread that I was planning on.”

“Homemade?”

“From a neighbor,” he said as he put the pail in the sink. He started the faucet and began to rinse the crabs, holding them under the water, then letting them scurry around the sink while he rinsed the next one. Allie picked up her cup and came over to watch him.

“Aren’t you afraid they’ll pinch you when you grab them?”

“No. Just grab ’em like this,” he said, demonstrating, and she smiled.

“I forget you’ve done this your whole life.” “New Bern’s small, but it does

teach you how to do the things that matter.”

She leaned against the counter, standing close to him, and emptied her cup. When the crabs were ready he put them in the pot on the stove. He washed his hands, turning to speak to her as he did so.

“You want to sit on the porch for a few minutes? I’d like to let ’em soak for a half hour.”

“Sure,” she said.

He wiped his hands, and together they went to the back porch. Noah flipped on the light as they went outside, and he sat in the older rocker, offering the newer one to her. When he saw her cup was empty, he went inside for a moment and emerged with another cup of tea and a beer for himself. He held out the cup and she took

“You wrote?”

“Dozens of letters. I wrote you for two years without receiving a single reply.”

She slowly shook her head before lowering her eyes.

“I didn’t know . . . ,” she finally said, quietly, and he knew it must have been her mother, checking the mail, removing the letters without her knowledge. It was what he had always suspected, and he watched as Allie came to the same realization.

“It was wrong of her to do that, Noah, and I’m sorry she did. But try to understand. Once I left, she probably thought it would be easier for me to just let it go. She never understood how much you meant to me, and to be honest, I don’t even know if she ever loved my father the way I loved you. In her mind, she was just

things, he thought about Allie and the love that was missing from both their lives.

Allie, too, was thinking. About Noah, about herself, about a lot of things. For a moment she wished she weren't engaged but then quickly cursed herself. It wasn't Noah she loved; she loved what they once had been. Besides, it was normal to feel this way. Her first real love, the only man she'd ever been with— how could she expect to forget him?

Yet was it normal for her insides to twitch whenever he came near? Was it normal to confess things she could never tell anyone else? Was it normal to come here three weeks from her wedding day?

“No, it's not,” she finally whispered to herself as she looked to the evening sky. “There's nothing normal about any of

this.”

Noah came out at that moment and she smiled at him, glad he'd come back so she didn't have to think about it anymore. “It's going to take a few minutes,” he said as he sat back down.

“That's fine. I'm not that hungry yet.”

He looked at her then, and she saw the softness in his eyes. “I'm glad you came, Allie,” he said.

“Me too. I almost didn't, though.”

“Why did you come?”

*I was compelled*, she wanted to say, but didn't. “Just to see you, to find out what you've been up to. To see how you are.”

He wondered if that was all but didn't question further. Instead he changed the subject.

“By the way, I've been meaning to ask,

“Why not?”

“Shy, maybe, or afraid. I don’t know. It just didn’t seem like the right thing to do at the time.”

“Come to think of it, you were kind of shy, weren’t you.”

“I prefer the words ‘quiet confidence,’” he answered with a wink, and she smiled.

The vegetables and crabs were ready about the same time. “Be careful, they’re hot,” he said as he handed them to her, and they sat across from each other at the small wooden table. Then, realizing the tea was still on the counter, Allie stood and brought it over. After putting some vegetables and bread on their plates, Noah added a crab, and Allie sat for a moment, staring at it.

“It looks like a bug.”

never seemed to make a difference.

But sitting here now, she realized what she'd been missing.

The sky grew darker and the moon rose higher as the evening wore on. And without either of them being conscious of it, they began to regain the intimacy, the bond of familiarity, they had once shared.

They finished dinner, both pleased with the meal, neither talking much now. Noah looked at his watch and saw that it was getting late. The stars were out in full, the crickets a little quieter. He had enjoyed talking to Allie and wondered if he'd talked too much, wondered what she'd thought about his life, hoping it would somehow make a difference, if it could.

Noah got up and refilled the teapot.

and this, he realized, was his destiny.

“It’s been quite a night,” he said, his voice softer now.

“Yes, it has,” she said, “a wonderful night.” Noah turned to the stars, their twinkling lights reminding him that she would be leaving soon, and he felt almost empty inside. This was a night he wanted never to end. How should he tell her? What could he say that would make her stay?

He didn’t know. And thus the decision was made to say nothing. And he realized then that he had failed.

The rockers moved in quiet rhythm. Bats again, over the river. Moths kissing the porch light. Somewhere, he knew, there were people making love.

“Talk to me,” she finally said, her voice

sensual. Or was his mind playing tricks?

“What should I say?”

“Talk like you did to me under the oak tree.” And he did, reciting distant passages, toasting the night. Whitman and Thomas, because he loved the images. Tennyson and Browning, because their themes felt so familiar.

She rested her head against the back of the rocker, closing her eyes, growing just a bit warmer by the time he'd finished. It wasn't just the poems or his voice that did it. It was all of it, the whole greater than the sum of the parts. She didn't try to break it down, didn't want to, because it wasn't meant to be listened to that way. Poetry, she thought, wasn't written to be analyzed; it was meant to inspire without reason, to touch without understanding.

did she go further and dream of their naked bodies, which had been kept separate for far too long. . . .

He looked to the stars and remembered the thousands of empty nights he had spent since they'd last seen each other. Seeing her again brought all those feelings to the surface, and he found it impossible to press them back down. He knew then he wanted to make love to her again and to have her love in return. It was what he needed most in the world.

But he also realized it could never be. Now that she was engaged.

Allie knew by his silence that he was thinking about her and found that she reveled in it. She didn't know what his thoughts were exactly, didn't care really, just knew they were about her and that

was enough.

She thought about their conversation at dinner and wondered about loneliness. For some reason she couldn't picture him reading poetry to someone else or even sharing his dreams with another woman. He didn't seem the type. Either that, or she didn't want to believe it.

She put down the tea, then ran her hands through her hair, closing her eyes as she did so.

“Are you tired?” he asked, finally breaking free from his thoughts.

“A little. I should really be going in a couple of minutes.”

“I know,” he said, nodding, his tone neutral.

She didn't get up right away. Instead she picked up the cup and drank the last

even if the trial was going well. Law was his passion, and the late hours alone gave him the opportunity to catch up on his work without interruption.

He knew he would win the case because he mastered the law and charmed the jury. He always did, and losses were infrequent now. Part of it came from being able to select the cases he had the expertise to win. He had reached that level in his practice. Only a select few in the city had that kind of stature, and his earnings reflected that.

But the more important part of his success came from hard work. He had always paid attention to details, especially when he'd begun his practice. Little things, obscure things, and it had become a habit now. Whether it was a

part coming together.

Another part. . . but there was more. . . .

Allie, New Bern . . . and . . . and . . . something at a party. A comment in passing. From Allie's mother. He'd hardly noticed it. But what had she said?

And Lon paled then, remembering. Remembering what had been said so long ago. Remembering what Allie's mother had said.

It was something about Allie being in love one time with a young man from New Bern. Called it puppy love. So what, he had thought when he'd heard it, and had turned to smile at Allie.

But she hadn't smiled. She was angry. And then Lon guessed that she had loved that person far more deeply than her mother had suggested. Maybe even more

deeply than she loved him.

And now she was there. Interesting.

Lon brought his palms together, as though he were praying, resting them against his lips. Coincidence? Could be nothing. Could be exactly what she said. Could be stress and antique shopping. Possible. Even probable.

Yet . . . yet . . . what if?

Lon considered the other possibility, and for the first time in a long time, he became frightened.

What if? *What if she's with him?*

He cursed the trial, wishing it were over. Wishing he had gone with her. Wondering if she'd told him the truth, hoping that she had.

And he made up his mind then not to lose her. He would do anything it took to

water, he thought to himself, and he did it almost every day now. Sunny and clear or cold and bitter, it never mattered as he paddled in rhythm to music in his head, working above water the color of iron. He saw a family of turtles resting on a partially submerged log and watched as a heron broke for flight, skimming just above the water before vanishing into the silver twilight that preceded sunrise.

He paddled out to the middle of the creek, where he watched the orange glow begin to stretch across the water. He stopped paddling hard, giving just enough effort to keep him in place, staring until light began to break through the trees. He always liked to pause at daybreak—there was a moment when the view was spectacular, as if the world were being

the bank, leaving it a few feet from the water, and as he turned toward the house, he noted that his legs were still a little stiff.

The morning haze hadn't burned off yet, and he knew the stiffness in his legs usually predicted rain. He looked to the western sky and saw storm clouds, thick and heavy, far off but definitely present. The winds weren't blowing hard, but they were bringing the clouds closer. From the looks of them, he didn't want to be outside when they got here. Damn. How much time did he have? A few hours, maybe more. Maybe less.

He showered, put on new jeans, a red shirt, and black cowboy boots, brushed his hair, and went downstairs to the kitchen. He did the dishes from the night

before, picked up a little around the house, made himself some coffee, and went to the porch. The sky was darker now, and he checked the barometer. Steady, but it would start dropping soon. The western sky promised that.

He'd learned long ago to never underestimate the weather, and he wondered if it was a good idea to go out. The rain he could deal with; lightning was a different story. Especially if he was on the water. A canoe was no place to be when electricity sparked in humid air.

He finished his coffee, putting off the decision until later. He went to the toolshed and found his ax. After checking the blade by pressing his thumb to it, he sharpened it with a whetstone until it was ready. "A dull ax is more dangerous than a

didn't want to spend the time with her now.

She passed an art gallery, almost walked by it in her preoccupation, then turned and went back. She paused at the door for a second, surprised at how long it had been since she'd been in one. At least three years, maybe longer. Why had she avoided it?

She went inside—it had opened with the rest of the shops on Front Street—and browsed among the paintings. Many of the artists were local, and there was a strong sea flavor to their works. Lots of ocean scenes, sandy beaches, pelicans, old sailing ships, tug-boats, piers, and seagulls. But most of all, waves. Waves of every shape, size, and color imaginable, and after a while they all looked alike.

in the mirror, feeling oddly relaxed, not exactly sure why.

Down the stairs again and out the door. As she left she heard a voice behind her.

“Miss?”

She turned, knowing it was directed at her. The manager. Same man as yesterday, a curious look on his face.

“Yes?”

“You had some calls last night.”

She was shocked. “I did?”

“Yes. All from a Mr. Hammond.”

Oh, God.

“Lon called?”

“Yes, ma’am, four times. I talked to him when he called the second time. He was rather concerned about you. He said he was your fiancé.”

She smiled weakly, trying to hide what

## *Moving Water*

Noah was sitting in his rocker, drinking sweet tea, listening for the car, when he finally heard it turn up the drive. He went around front and watched the car pull up and park beneath the oak tree again. Same spot as yesterday. Clem barked a greeting at her car door, tail wagging, and he saw Allie wave from inside the car.

She stepped out, patted Clem on the head while she cooed at her, then turned, smiling at Noah as he walked toward her. She looked more relaxed than yesterday, more confident, and again he felt a slight shock at seeing her. It was different from yesterday, though. Newer feelings now,

He looked at the clouds again, noting their approach. "Then we'd better go now," he said. "Can I bring that in for you?"

She nodded, handing her bag to him, and he jogged to the house and brought it inside, where he placed it on a chair in the living room. Then he grabbed some bread and put it in a bag, bringing it with him as he left the house.

They walked to the canoe, Allie beside him. A little closer than yesterday.

"What exactly is this place?"

"You'll see."

"You're not even going to give me a hint?"

"Well," he said, "do you remember when we took the canoe out and watched the sun come up?"

mullet splashed near the bank. The paddle moved rhythmically, causing baffles that rocked the boat ever so slightly. The breeze had stopped, and the clouds grew blacker as the canoe moved toward some unknown destination.

Allie noticed it all, every sound, every thought. Her senses had come alive, invigorating her, and she felt her mind drifting through the last few weeks. She thought about the anxiety coming here had caused her. The shock at seeing the article, the sleepless nights, her short temper during daylight. Even yesterday she had been afraid and wanted to run away. The tension was gone now, every bit of it, replaced by something else, and she was glad about that as she rode in silence in the old red canoe.

said.

Would Lon encourage her painting? She remembered showing him one of her paintings a couple of months after they had first started going out. It was an abstract painting and was meant to inspire thought. In a way, it resembled the painting above Noah's fireplace, the one Noah understood completely, though it may have been a touch less passionate. Lon had stared at it, studied it almost, and then had asked her what it was supposed to be. She hadn't bothered to answer.

She shook her head then, knowing she wasn't being completely fair. She loved Lon, and always had, for other reasons. Though he wasn't Noah, Lon was a good man, the kind of man she'd always known she would marry. With Lon there would

## *Swans and Storms*

They sat in the middle of a small lake fed by the waters of Brices Creek. It wasn't large, maybe a hundred yards across, and she was surprised at how invisible it had been just moments before.

It was spectacular. Tundra swan and Canada geese literally surrounded them. Thousands of them. Birds floating so close together in some places that she couldn't see the water. From a distance, the groups of swans looked almost like icebergs.

“Oh, Noah,” she finally said softly, “it's beautiful.”

They sat in silence for a long while, watching the birds. Noah pointed out a

better. He hadn't known how she was feeling about it. Even though she'd made the decision to come, he doubted that she'd expected to be caught in a storm like this.

They reached the dock a couple of minutes later, and Noah moved in close enough for Allie to step out. He helped her up, then got out himself and dragged the canoe up the bank far enough not to drift away. Just in case, he tied it to the dock, knowing another minute in the rain wouldn't make any difference.

As he was tying the canoe, he looked up at Allie and stopped breathing for just a second. She was incredibly beautiful as she waited, watching him, completely comfortable in the rain. She didn't try to keep dry or hide herself, and he could see

the outline of her breasts as they pressed through the fabric of the dress that clung tightly to her body. It wasn't a cold rain, but he could see her nipples erect and protruding, hard like little rocks. He felt his loins begin to stir and quickly turned away, embarrassed, muttering to himself, glad the rain muffled any sound of it. When he finished and stood, Allie took his hand in hers, surprising him. Despite the downpour, they didn't rush toward the house, and Noah imagined what it would be like to spend the night with her.

Allie, too, was wondering about him. She felt the warmth in his hands and wondered what it would be like to have them touch her body, feeling all of her, lingering slowly across her skin. Just thinking about it made her take a deep

life. He didn't see her come in, and she watched him as he worked. He had changed his clothes as well and looked good: his shoulders broad, wet hair hanging just over his collar, jeans tight.

He poked the fire, moving the logs, and added some more kindling. Allie leaned against the door-jamb, one leg crossed over the other, and continued to watch him. In a few minutes the fire had turned to flames, even and steady. He turned to the side to straighten the remaining unused logs and caught a glimpse of her out of the corner of his eye. He turned back to her quickly.

Even in his clothes she looked beautiful. After a moment he turned away shyly, going back to stacking the logs.

"I didn't hear you come in," he said,

had done, and went to sit beside her. He put down two glasses and poured some bourbon into each of them. Outside, the sky grew darker.

Thunder again. Loud. The storm in full fury, winds whipping the rain in circles.

“It’s quite a storm,” Noah said as he watched the drops flow in vertical streams on the windows. He and Allie were close now, though not touching, and Noah watched her chest rise slightly with every breath, imagining the feel of her body once again before fighting it back.

“I like it,” she said, taking a sip. “I’ve always liked thunderstorms. Even as a young girl.”

“Why?” Saying anything, keeping his balance.

“I don’t know. They just always seemed

summer, and she said that you got what you wanted, and that she wasn't surprised that you wouldn't write. I didn't believe that you were that way, I never did, but hearing it and thinking about all our differences made me wonder if maybe the summer meant more to me than it had meant to you. . . . And then, while all this was going through my head, I heard from Sarah. She said that you had left New Bern."

"Fin and Sarah always knew where I was—"

She held up her hand to stop him. "I know, but I never asked. I assumed that you had left New Bern to start a new life, one without me. Why else wouldn't you write? Or call? Or come see me?"

Noah looked away without answering,

He almost stopped there, knowing that if he kept the words inside him, he could somehow keep control, the same control he had kept the past fourteen years. But something else had overtaken him now, and he gave in to it, hoping somehow, in some way, it would take them back to what they'd had so long ago.

“I’m not saying it because I’m sweet. I’m saying it because I love you now and I always have. More than you can imagine.”

A log snapped, sending sparks up the chimney, and both of them noticed the smoldering remains, almost burned through. The fire needed another log, but neither of them moved.

Allie took another sip of bourbon and began to feel its effects. But it wasn't just the alcohol that made her hold Noah a

sounds.

They gave in then to everything they had fought the last fourteen years. Allie lifted her head off his shoulder, looked at him with hazy eyes, and Noah kissed her softly on the lips. She brought her hand to his face and touched his cheek, brushing it softly with her fingers. He leaned in slowly and kissed her again, still soft and tender, and she kissed back, feeling the years of separation dissolve into passion.

She closed her eyes and parted her lips as he ran his fingers up and down her arms, slowly, lightly. He kissed her neck, her cheek, her eyelids, and she felt the moisture of his mouth linger wherever his lips had touched. She took his hand and led it to her breasts, and a whimper rose in her throat as he gently touched them

through the thin fabric of the shirt.

The world seemed dreamlike as she pulled back from him, the firelight setting her face aglow. Without speaking, she started to undo the buttons on his shirt. He watched her as she did it and listened to her soft breaths as she made her way downward. With each button he could feel her fingers brushing against his skin, and she smiled softly at him when she finally finished. He felt her slide her hands inside, touching him as lightly as possible, letting her hands explore his body. He was hot and she ran her hand over his slightly wet chest, feeling his hair between her fingers. Leaning in, she kissed his neck gently as she pulled the shirt over his shoulders, locking his arms behind his back. She lifted her head and allowed him

for as long as I have. I love you, Allie, more than you can ever imagine. I always have, and I always will.”

“Oh, Noah,” she said, pulling him to her. She wanted him, needed him now more than ever, like nothing she’d ever known.

and thought about it.

“I don’t like it,” he finally said, “not at all. But Mr. Hammond has never made a similar request before, and I assume the matter is very important to him.”

He paused for effect, then looked to some papers on his desk. “I’ll agree to adjourn until Monday. Nine o’clock sharp.”

“Thank you, Your Honor,” Lon said.

Two minutes later he was leaving the courthouse. He walked to the car he had parked directly across the street, got in, and began the drive to New Bern, his hands shaking.

He stood there without moving for a long time. As quickly as she had come, she was gone. Forever this time. Forever.

He closed his eyes then and watched her leave once more, her car moving steadily away from him, taking his heart with her.

But, like her mother, he realized sadly, she never looked back.

*able to come together for even a short period of time. And if, in some distant place in the future, we see each other in our new lives, I will*

*smile at you with joy, and remember how we spent a summer beneath the trees, learning from each other and growing in love. And maybe, for a brief moment, you'll feel it too, and you'll smile back, and savor the memories we will always share together.*

*I love you, Allie.*

*Noah*

She read the letter again, more slowly this time, then read it a third time before she put it back into the envelope. Once more, she imagined him writing it, and for

Minutes pass before she finally turns to me. She is crying. I smile and release her hand, then reach in my pocket. I take out a handkerchief and wipe at her tears. She looks at me as I do so, and I wonder what she is thinking.

“That was a beautiful story.”

A light rain begins to fall. Little drops tap gently on the window. I take her hand again. It is going to be a good day, a very good day. A magical day. I smile, I can't help it.

“Yes, it is,” I tell her.

“Did you write it?” she asks. Her voice is like a whisper, a light wind flowing through the leaves.

“Yes,” I answer.

She turns toward the nightstand. Her medicine is in a little cup. Mine too. Little

not held hands with fingers interlocked since we moved here. I am sad about this, but it is my fault, not hers. It is arthritis in the worst form, rheumatoid and advanced. My hands are misshapen and grotesque now, and they throb during most of my waking hours. I look at them and want them gone, amputated, but then I would not be able to do the little things I must do. So I use my claws, as I call them sometimes, and every day I take her hands despite the pain, and I do my best to hold them because that is what she wants me to do.

Although the Bible says man can live to be 120, I don't want to, and I don't think my body would make it even if I did. It is falling apart, dying one piece at a time, steady erosion on the inside and at the joints. My hands are useless, my kidneys

going.

I lifted the seal and removed both pages. I put the second page aside and moved the first page into better light and began to read:

*My dearest Allie,*

*The porch is silent except for the sounds that float from the shadows, and for once I am at a loss for words. It is a strange experience for me, for when I think of you and the life we have shared, there is much to remember. A lifetime of memories. But to put it into words? I do not know if I am able. I am not a poet, and yet a poem is needed to fully express the way I feel about you.*

see it, but I can because the sun is bright. I point, too.

“Caspian stern,” I say softly, and we devote our attention to it and stare as it glides over Brices Creek. And, like an old habit rediscovered, when I lower my arm, I put my hand on her knee and she doesn’t make me move it.

She is right about my evasiveness. On days like these, when only her memory is gone, I am vague in my answers because I’ve hurt my wife unintentionally with careless slips of my tongue many times these past few years, and I am determined not to let it happen again. So I limit myself and answer only what is asked, sometimes not too well, and I volunteer nothing.

This is a split decision, both good and

“I’m thinking about you.”

She makes no response to this except to squeeze my arm, and I can tell she likes what I said. Our life together has enabled me to see the clues, even if she does not know them herself. I go on:

“I know you can’t remember who you are, but I can, and I find that when I look at you, it makes me feel good.”

She taps my arm and smiles. “You’re a kind man with a loving heart. I hope I enjoyed you as much before as I do now.”

We walk some more. Finally she says, “I have to tell you something.”

“Go ahead.”

“I think I have an admirer.”

“An admirer?”

“Yes.”

“I see.”

most days and every morning there can be no doubt. On this there is agreement.

But why, then, is her condition different? Why does she sometimes change after I read? I tell the doctors the reason—I know it in my heart, but I am not believed. Instead they look to science. Four times specialists have traveled from Chapel Hill to find the answer. Four times they have left without understanding. I tell them, “You can’t possibly understand it if you use only your training and your books,” but they shake their heads and answer: “Alzheimer’s does not work like this. With her condition, it’s just not possible to have a conversation or improve as the day goes on. Ever.”

But she does. Not every day, not most of the time, and definitely less than she

used to. But sometimes. And all that is gone on these days is her memory, as if she has amnesia. But her emotions are normal, her thoughts are normal. And these are the days that I know I am doing right.

Dinner is waiting in her room when we return. It has been arranged for us to eat here, as it always is on days like these, and once again I could ask for no more. The people here take care of everything. They are good to me, and I am thankful.

The lights are dimmed, the room is lit by two candles on the table where we will sit, and music is playing softly in the background. The cups and plates are plastic, and the carafe is filled with apple juice, but rules are rules and she doesn't

comes softly.

“I’m so afraid. I’m afraid of forgetting you again. It isn’t fair ...I just can’t bear to give this up.”

Her voice breaks as she finishes, but I don’t know what to say. I know the evening is coming to an end, and there is nothing I can do to stop the inevitable. In this I am a failure. I finally tell her:

“I’ll never leave you. What we have is forever.” She knows this is all I can do, for neither of us wants empty promises. But I can tell by the way she is looking at me that once again she wishes there were more.

The crickets serenade us, and we begin to pick at our dinner. Neither one of us is hungry, but I lead by example and she follows me. She takes small bites and

and start to cry as I pick up the notebook. Allie does not notice. I understand, for her mind is gone.

A couple of pages fall to the floor, and I bend over to pick them up. I am tired now, so I sit, alone and apart from my wife. And when the nurses come in they see two people they must comfort. A woman shaking in fear from demons in her mind, and the old man who loves her more deeply than life itself, crying softly in the corner, his face in his hands.

I spend the rest of the evening alone in my room. My door is partially open and I see people walk by, some strangers, some friends, and if I concentrate, I can hear them talking about families, jobs, and visits to parks. Ordinary conversations,

even heard about it. I guess that's what love is all about. You two were meant for each other. She must love you very much. You know that, don't you?"

"I know," I say, but I can't say anything more. "What's really bothering you, Noah? Did Allie say or do something that hurt your feelings?"

"No. She was wonderful, actually. It's just that right now I feel . . . alone."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Nobody's alone."

"I'm alone," I say as I look at my watch and think of his family sleeping in a quiet house, the place he should be, "and so are you."

The next few days passed without

“especially for someone his age, and the consequences could be severe.” Grim faces would prelude their predictions —“loss of speech, loss of movement, paralysis.” Another chart notation, another beep of a strange machine, and they’d leave, never knowing I heard every word. I tried not to think of these things afterward but instead concentrated on Allie, bringing a picture of her to my mind whenever I could. I did my best to bring her life into mine, to make us one again. I tried to feel her touch, hear her voice, see her face, and when I did tears would fill my eyes because I didn’t know if I would be able to hold her again, to whisper to her, to spend the day with her talking and reading and walking. This was not how I’d imagined, or hoped, it would end. I’d

always assumed I would go last. This wasn't how it was supposed to be.

I drifted in and out of consciousness for days until another foggy morning when my promise to Allie spurred my body once again. I opened my eyes and saw a room full of flowers, and their scent motivated me further. I looked for the buzzer, struggled to press it, and a nurse arrived thirty seconds later, followed closely by Dr. Barnwell, who smiled almost immediately.

"I'm thirsty," I said with a raspy voice, and Dr. Barnwell smiled broadly.

"Welcome back," he said, "I knew you'd make it."

Two weeks later I am able to leave the hospital, though I am only half a man now.

If I were a Cadillac, I would drive in circles, one wheel turning, for the right side of my body is weaker than the left. This, they tell me, is good news, for the paralysis could have been total. Sometimes, it seems, I am surrounded by optimists.

The bad news is that my hands prevent me from using either cane or wheelchair, so I must now march to my own unique cadence to keep upright. Not left-right-left as was common in my youth, or even the shuffle-shuffle of late, but rather slow-shuffle, slide-the-right, slow-shuffle. I am an epic adventure now when I travel the halls. It is slow going even for me, this coming from a man who could barely outpace a turtle two weeks ago.

It is late when I return, and when I

*me to the place where I dream of you and the wonderful man you are.*

*I see the flame beside me and it reminds me of another fire from decades ago, with me in your soft clothes and you in your jeans. I knew then we would always be together, even though I wavered the following day. My heart had been captured, roped by a southern poet, and I knew inside that it had always been yours. Who was I to question a love that rode on shooting stars and roared like crashing waves? For that is what it was between us then and that is what it is today.*

*I remember coming back to you the next day, the day my mother visited. I was so scared, more*

*way to come back to you despite my disease, I promise you that. And this is where the story comes in. When I am lost and lonely, read this story—just as you told it to the children—and know that in some way, I will realize it's about us. And perhaps, just perhaps, we will find a way to be together again.*

*Please don't be angry with me on days I do not remember you, and we both know they will come. Know that I love you, that I always will, and that no matter what happens, know I have led the greatest life possible. My life with you.*

*And if you save this letter to read again, then believe what I am writing for you now. Noah,*

# *A Q & A with Nicholas Sparks*

Q. What is the inspiration for this book? Is it based to any extent on your own experiences or the experiences of those you know?

*The Notebook* was originally inspired by the story of my wife's beloved grandparents. They had a

feel it in their own lives, but doubt if other people do.

And those who don't have it hope that someday they will. I think *The Notebook* tapped into that feeling.

*The Notebook* takes place in a small southern town.

Q. Why did you choose that setting rather than, say, a big city like New York?

I live in a small southern town, and life there is different than in a big city.

nostalgia that people have for the way things used to be. Simpler, less rushed, more community oriented, things like that.

The book details the lives of very old, as well as very young, people. How did

Q. someone as young as yourself acquire the insight to write about the experience of being old in such a moving way?

That's what writers strive to

A. do. Though I can't describe the process of writing and how I do it (I don't really understand where my ideas come from), I do keep a few general rules in mind, no matter what type of character I'm writing.

First, I tend to assume that most people— male or female, young or old—have largely the same types of thoughts. However, the difference lies in their

right” to me. Only then will I accept it.

Q. Letter-writing plays such a big part in *The Notebook*. Is there something about letter writing that intrigues you?

The epistolary form of writing has been around for centuries, of course. I’m neither the first nor the finest to use it. But letters are a wonderful *vehicle* for writing, if used effectively and sparingly. In the case

A.

of a novel written primarily in third person, for instance, a letter might allow for deeper insight, since a letter is written in first person.

Also, I'm fond of letter writing myself. Call it old-fashioned, but that's how my wife and I fell in love. We lived a thousand miles apart in the early stages of our relationship, and I used to write her every day.

being an author.

Q. What advice do you have for aspiring writers?

My advice is four-fold.

First, read as much as possible. Read all types of novels—don't limit yourself to one genre. Each genre seems to have its own

A. strengths and weaknesses.

For instance, “techno-thrillers” are very good at describing action, not so

good at describing romance or love. Romance novels are just the opposite.

Second, learn as much as you can about publishing. Learn how it works, how to get published, how to market your book, what editors look for, etc. There's a wealth of information in any bookstore and it's important to understand the business aspects of writing.

sidewalk. There are other things too: I can sometimes lose track of time when staring at a sky filled with wind-whipped clouds, and when I hear thunder rumbling, I always draw near the window to watch for lightning. When the next brilliant flash illuminates the sky, I sometimes find myself filled with longing, though I'm at a loss to tell you what it is that I feel my life is missing.

My name is Wilson Lewis, and this is the story of a wedding. It is also the story of my marriage, and despite the thirty years that Jane and I have spent together, I suppose I should begin by admitting that others know far more about marriage than I. A man can learn nothing by asking my advice. It pains me to admit that I've been blind and stubborn and dumb as a goldfish

No, my sin was a small one in the grand scheme of things, an incident that under different circumstances might have been the subject of a humorous anecdote in later years. But it hurt her, it hurt us, and thus it is here where I must begin my story.

It was August 22, 2002, and what I did was this: I rose and ate breakfast, then spent the day at the office, as is my custom. The events of my workday played no role in what came after; to be honest, I can't remember anything about it other than to recall that it was nothing extraordinary. I arrived home at my regular hour and was pleasantly surprised to see Jane preparing my favorite meal in the kitchen.

When she turned to greet me, I thought I saw her eyes flicker downward, looking

to see if I was holding something other than my briefcase, but I was empty-handed. I kissed her and an hour later, we ate dinner together, discussing our children and my work, the type of conversation that had become routine for us. Afterward, as Jane began collecting the dishes from the table, I retrieved a few legal documents from my briefcase that I wished to review. Carrying them to my office, I was perusing the first page when I noticed Jane standing in the doorway. She was drying her hands on a dish towel, and her eyes registered a disappointment that I had come to recognize, if not fully understand.

“Is there anything you want to say?” she finally asked.

I hesitated, aware there was more to her

ordinary, I always assumed that Jane was as content as I.

Like many men, my life was largely centered around work. For the past thirty years, I've worked with the law firm of Ambry, Saxon and Tundle in New Bern, North Carolina. I enjoy golfing and gardening on the weekends, prefer classical music, and I read the newspaper every morning, beginning with the sports page. Though Jane was once an elementary school teacher, she spent the majority of our married life raising three children. She ran both the household and our social life, and her proudest possessions are the photo albums that she carefully assembled as a visual history of our lives. Our brick home is complete with a picket fence and automatic

sprinklers, we own two cars and are members of both the Rotary Club and the Chamber of Commerce. In the course of our married life, we've saved for retirement, built a wooden swing set in the backyard that now sits unused, attended dozens of parent-teacher conferences, voted regularly, and contributed to the Episcopal church each and every Sunday. At fifty-six, I'm three years older than my wife.

As I sat there reviewing the milestones of our years together, I wondered whether the seeds of Jane's melancholy lay somehow in the fact that we're such an unlikely pair. We're different in almost every way, and though opposites can and do attract, I have always felt that I made the better choice on our wedding day. Jane

Joseph, our second born, is a year younger than Anna, and again, we have little in common. He's taller and thinner than I am, wears jeans to most social functions, and when he visits at Thanksgiving or Christmas, he eats only vegetables. Like Jane, he was empathetic even as a child and he chewed his fingernails worrying about others. They've been nothing but nubs since he was five years old. Needless to say, when I suggested that he consider majoring in business or economics, he ignored my advice and chose sociology. He now works for a battered women's shelter in New York City, though he tells us nothing more about his job. I know he wonders about the choices I've made in my life, just as I wonder about his, but despite our

good idea,” I agreed. “We haven’t been to New York since he first moved there.”

In the back of my mind, I noted that it might do us some good as a couple to get away for a few days. Perhaps that had even been the reason for Jane’s suggestion.

Jane smiled briefly before lowering her gaze to her plate. “There’s something else, too.”

“Yes?”

“Well, it’s just that you’re pretty busy at work, and I know how hard it is for you to get away.”

“I think I can clear up my schedule for a few days,” I said, already mentally leafing through my work calendar. It would be tough, but I could do it. “When did you want to go?”

“Well, that’s the thing . . .” she said.  
“What’s the thing?”

“Wilson, please let me finish,” she said wearily. She drew a long breath. “What I was trying to say was that I think I might like to visit him by myself.”

For a moment, I didn’t know what to say.

“You’re upset, aren’t you?” she asked.

“No,” I said quickly. “He’s our son. How could I get upset about that?” As if to underscore my equanimity, I used my knife to cut another bite of meat. “So when were you thinking about heading up there?” I asked.

“Next week,” she said. “On Thursday.”

“Thursday?”

“I already have my ticket,” she explained.

“It should be a wonderful weekend,” I added.

She reached for my plate and began to rinse, her eyes still focused on her task.

“Oh, about that,” she said.

“Yes?”

“I was thinking about staying up there for more than just the weekend.”

At her words, I felt my shoulders tense. “How long are you planning to stay?” I asked.

She set my plate off to the side. “A couple weeks,” she answered.

I didn't blame Jane for the course our marriage seemed to have taken. Somehow I knew I bore much of the responsibility, even if I hadn't put all of the pieces of why and how together yet. For starters, I

to her, Allie would become momentarily lucid, despite the ravages of Alzheimer's. The lucidity never lasted long—and as the disease progressed further, it ceased completely—but when it happened, Allie's improvement was dramatic enough for specialists to travel from Chapel Hill to Creekside in the hopes of understanding it. That reading to Allie sometimes worked, there was no doubt. Why it worked, however, was something the specialists were never able to figure out.

“Do you know why I did that?” he asked.

I brought my hands to my lap. “I believe so,” I answered. “It helped Allie. And because she made you promise you would.”

“Yes,” he said, “that's true.” He paused