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The Notebook

Nicholas Sparks

A Novel



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CHAPTER ONE - MIRACLES

WHO AM I? And how, I wonder, will this story end?

The sun has come up and I am sitting by a window that is foggy with the breath of a life gone by. I'm a sight this morning: two shirts, heavy pants, a scarf wrapped twice around my neck and tucked into a thick sweater knitted by my daughter thirty birthdays ago. The thermostat in my room is set as high as it will go, and a smaller space heater sits directly behind me. II clicks and groans and spews hot air like a fairy-tale dragon, and still my body shivers with a cold that will never go away, a cold that has been eighty years in the making. Eighty years. I wonder if this is how it is for everyone my age.

My life? It isn't easy to explain. It has not been the rip-roaring spectacular I fancied it would be, but neither have I burrowed around with the gophers. I suppose it has most resembled a blue-chip stock: fairly stable, more ups than downs, and gradually trending upwards over time. I've learned that not everyone can say this about his life. But do not be misled. 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.

The romantics would call this a love story: the cynics would call it a tragedy. In my mind it's a little bit of both, and no matter how you choose to view it in the end, it does not change the fact that it involves a great deal of my life. I have no complaints about the path I've chosen to follow and the places it has taken me—the path has always been the right one. I wouldn't have had it any other way.

Time, unfortunately doesn't make it easy to stay on course. The path is straight as ever, but now it is strewn with the rocks and gravel that accumulate over a lifetime. Until three years ago it would have been easy to ignore, but it's impossible now. There is a sickness rolling through my body; I'm neither strong nor healthy, and my days are spent like an old party balloon: listless, spongy and growing softer over time.

I cough, and through squinted eyes I check my watch. I realize it is time to go. I stand and shuffle across the room; stopping at the desk to pick up the notebook I have read a hundred times. I slip it beneath my arm and continue on my way to the place I must go.

I walk on tiled floors, white speckled with grey. Like my hair and the hair of most people here, though I'm the only one in the hallway this morning. They are in their rooms, alone except for television, but they, like me, are used to it. A person can get used to anything, given enough lime.

I hear the muffled sounds of crying in the distance and know who is making them. The nurses see me and we smile and exchange greetings. I am sure they wonder about me and the things that I go through every day. I listen as they begin to whisper among themselves when I pass.

"There he goes again." I hear. "I hope it turns out well." But they say nothing directly to me about it.

A minute later, I reach the room. The door has been propped open for me, as it usually is. There are two nurses in the room, and as I enter they say "Good morning" with cheery voices, and I take a moment to ask about the kids and the schools and upcoming vacations. We talk above the crying for a minute or so. They do not seem to notice: they have become numb to it, but then again, so have I.

Afterwards I sit in the chair that has come to be shaped like me. They are finishing up now; her clothes are on, but she is cry?ing. It will become quieter after they leave. I know. The excite?ment of the morning always upsets her, and today is no exception. Finally the nurses walk out. Both of them touch me and smile as they walk by.

I sit for just a second and stare at her, but she doesn't return the look. I understand, for she doesn't know who I am. I'm a stranger to her. Then, turning away, I how my head and pray silently for the strength I know I will need.

Ready now. On go the glasses, out of my pocket comes a magnifier. I put it on the table for a moment while I open the notebook. It takes two licks on my gnarled finger to get the well-worn cover open to the first page. Then I put the magnifier in place.

There is always a moment right before I begin to read the story when my mind churns, and I wonder, will it happen today? I don't know, for I never know beforehand and deep down it really doesn't matter. It's the possibility that keeps me going. And though you may call me a dreamer or a fool. I believe that anything is possible.

I realize that the odds, and science, are against me. But science is not the total answer. This I know, this I have learned in my life?time. And that leaves me with the belief that miracles, no matter how

inexplicable or unbelievable, are real and can occur without regard to the natural order of things. So once again, just as I do every day, I begin to read the notebook aloud, so that she can hear it, in the hope that the miracle that has come to dominate my life will once again prevail.

And maybe, just maybe, it will.

The Notebook

CHAPTER TWO GHOSTS

It was early October 1946, and Noah Calhoun watched the fading sun sink lower from the porch of his plantation-style home. He liked to sit here in the evenings, especially after working hard all day, and let his thoughts wander. It was how he relaxed, a routine he'd learned from his father.

He especially liked to look at the trees and their reflections in the river. North Carolina trees are beautiful in deep autumn: greens, yellows, reds, oranges, every shade in between, their dazzling colours glowing with the sun.

The house was built in 1772, making it one of the oldest, as well as largest, homes in New Bern. Originally it was the main house on a working plantation, and he had bought it right after the war ended and had spent the last eleven months and a small fortune repairing it. The reporter from the Raleigh paper had done an arti?cle on it a few weeks ago and said it was one of the finest restor?ations he'd ever seen. At least the house was. The rest of the property was another story, and that was where Noah had spent most of the day.

The home sat on twelve acres adjacent to Brices Creek, and he'd worked on the wooden fence that lined the other three sides of the property; checking for dry rot or termites, replacing posts where he had to. He still had more work to do on the west side, and as he'd put the tools away earlier he'd made a mental note to call and have some more timber delivered. He'd gone into the house, drunk a glass of sweet tea, then showered, the water washing away dirt and fatigue.

Afterwards he'd combed his hair back, put on some faded jeans and a long-sleeved blue shirt, poured himself another glass of tea and gone to the porch, where he sat every day at this time.

He reached for his guitar, remembering his father as he did so, thinking how much he missed him. Noah strummed once, adjusted the tension on two strings, then strummed again, soft, quiet music. He hummed at first, then began to sing as night came down around him.

It was a little after seven when he stopped and settled back into his rocking chair. By habit, he looked upwards and saw Orion, the Big Dipper and the Pole Star, twinkling in the autumn sky.

He started to run the numbers in his head, then stopped. He knew he'd spent almost his entire savings on the house and would have to find a job again soon, but he pushed the thought away and decided to

enjoy the remaining months of restoration without worrying about it. It would work out for him, he knew: it always did.

Cem, his hound dog, came up to him then and nuzzled his hand before lying down at his feet. Hey girl, how're you doing?" he asked as he patted her head, and she whined softly, her soft round eyes peering upwards. A car accident had taken one of her legs, but she still moved well enough and kept him company on nights like these.

He was thirty-one now, not too old, but old enough to be lonely. He hadn't dated since he'd been back here, hadn't met anyone who remotely interested him, It was his own fault, he knew. There was something that kept a distance between him and any woman who started to get close, something he wasn't sure he could change even if he tried. And sometimes, in the moments before sleep, he won?dered if he was destined to be alone for ever.

The evening passed, staying warm, nice. Noah listened to the crickets and the rustling leaves, thinking that the sound of nature was more real and aroused more emotion than things like cars and planes. Natural things gave back more than they took, and their sounds always brought him back to the way man was supposed to he. There were times during the war, especially after a major engagement, when he had often thought about these simple sounds. "It'll keep you from going crazy," his father had told him the day he'd shipped out. "It's God's music and it'll take you home."

He finished his tea, went inside, found a book, then turned on the porch light on his way back out. After sitting down again, he looked at the book. It was old, the cover was torn, and the pages were stained with mud and water. It was Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman, and he had carried it with him throughout the war. He let the book open randomly and read the words in front of him:

This is thy hour, 0 Soul, thy free flight into the wordless,

Away from hooks, away from art, the day erased, the lesson done,

Thee fully forth emerging, silent, gazing, pondering the themes thou lovest best,

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.

Now Gus showed up a couple of nights a week, usually around eight. With four kids and eleven grandchildren in the house, he needed to get out now and then, and Noah couldn't blame him. Usually Gus would bring his harmonica and, after talking for a little while, they'd play a few songs together.

He'd come to regard Gus as family. There really wasn't anyone else, at least not since his father died last year. He was an only child and his mother had died of influenza when he was two. And though he had wanted to at one time, he had never married.

But he had been in love once, that he knew. Once and only once, and a long time ago. And it had changed him forever. Per?fect love did that to a person, and this had been perfect.

Coastal clouds slowly began to roll across the evening sky, turn?ing silver with the reflection of the moon. As they thickened, he leaned his head back against the rocking chair. His legs moved automatically, keeping a steady rhythm, and he felt his mind drift?ing back to a warm evening like this fourteen years ago.

It was just after graduation 1932, the opening night of the Neuse River Festival. The town was out in full, enjoying barbecues and games of chance. It was humid that night—for some reason he remembered that clearly. He arrived alone, and as he strolled through the crowd, looking for friends, he saw Fin and Sarah, two people he'd grown up with, talking to a girl he'd never seen before. She was pretty, he remembered thinking, and when he finally joined them, she looked his way with a pair of hazy eyes. "Hi," she'd said simply as she offered her hand. "Finley's told me a lot about you."

An ordinary beginning, something that would have been forgot?ten had it been anyone but her. But as he shook her hand and met those striking emerald eyes, he knew before he'd taken his next breath that she was the one he could spend the rest of his life look?ing for but never find again. She seemed that good, that perfect.

From there, it went like a tornado wind. Fin told him she was spending the summer in New Bern with her family, because her father worked for a tobacco firm, and though he only nodded, the way she

was looking at him made his silence seem okay. Fin laughed then, because he knew what was happening, and Sarah suggested they get some cherry cokes, and the four of them stayed at the festival until the crowds were thin and everything closed up for the night.

They met the following day, and the day after that, and they soon became inseparable. Every morning but Sunday, when he had to go to church, he would finish his chores as quickly as possible, then make a straight line to Fort Totten Park, where she'd be waiting for him. Because she was a newcomer and hadn't lived in a small town before, they 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 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 afterwards, and when they paused on the porch after saying good night, he kissed her for the first time and wondered why he had waited as long as he had.

Later in the summer he brought her to this house, looked past the decay, and told her that one day he was going to own it and fix it up. They spent hours together talking about their dreams—his of seeing the world, hers of being an artist—and on a humid night in August. They both lost their virginity. When she left three weeks later, she took a piece of him and the rest of summer with her. He watched her leave town on an early rainy morning, watched through eyes that hadn't slept the night before, then went home and packed a hag. He spent the next week alone on Harkers Island.

Noah checked his watch. Eight twelve. He got up and walked to the front of the house and looked up the road. Gus wasn't in sight, and Noah figured he wouldn't be coming. He went back to his rocker and sat again.

He remembered talking to Gus about her. The first time he mentioned her. Gus started to shake his head and laugh. "So that's the ghost you been running from." When asked what he meant. Gus said. "You know, the ghost, the memory. I been watchin' you workin' day and night, slavin' so hard you barely have time to catch your breath. People do that for three reasons. Either they crazy, or stupid, or tryin'

to forget. And with you, I knew you was tryin' to forget. I just didn't know what."

Gus was right, of course. New Bern was haunted now. Haunted by the ghost of her memory. He saw her in Fort Totten Park, their place, every time he walked by. When he sat on the porch at night with his guitar, he saw her beside him, listening as he played the music of his childhood. Everywhere he looked, he saw things that brought her back to life.

Noah shook his head, and when her image began to fade he returned to Whitman. He read for an hour, looking up every now and then to see raccoons and possums scurrying near the creek. At nine thirty he closed the book, went upstairs to the bedroom and wrote in his journal. Forty minutes later he was sleeping. Clem wandered up the stairs, sniffed him as he slept, and then paced in circles before finally curling up at the foot of his bed.

EARLIER THAT evening and a hundred miles away, she sat alone on the porch swing of her parents' home, one leg tucked beneath her, wondering if she'd made the right decision. She'd struggled with it for days—and had struggled some more this evening—but in the end she knew she would never forgive herself if she let the oppor?tunity slip away.

Lon didn't know the real reason she left the following morning. The week before, she'd hinted to him that she might want to visit some antique shops near the coast. "It's just a couple of days," she said, "and besides, I need a break from planning the wedding." She felt bad about the lie, but knew there was no way she could tell him the truth. Her leaving had nothing to do with him, and it wouldn't he fair of her to ask him to understand.

It was an easy drive from Raleigh, slightly more than two hours, and she arrived a little before eleven. She checked into a small inn downtown, went to her room and unpacked her suitcase, hanging her dresses in the closet and putting everything else in the drawers. She had a quick lunch, asked the waitress for directions to the nearest antique stores, then spent the next few hours shopping. By four thirty she was back in her room.

She sat on the edge of the bed, picked up the phone and called Lon. He couldn't speak long, but before they hung up she gave him the phone number where she was staying and promised to call the following day. Good, she thought while hanging up the phone. Routine conversation, nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing to make

him suspicious.

She'd known him almost four years now, it was 1942 when they met, the world at war and America one year in. Everyone was doing their part and she was volunteering at the hospital down?town. The first waves of wounded young soldiers were coming home, and she spent her days with broken men and shattered bodies. When Lon, with his easy charm, introduced himself at a party, she saw in him exactly what she needed: someone with con?fidence about the future and a sense of humour that drove all her fears away.

He was handsome, intelligent and driven, a successful lawyer eight years older than she, and he pursued his job with passion, not only winning cases but also making a name for himself. She understood his vigorous pursuit of success, for her father and most of the men she met in her social circle were the same way. Like them, he'd been raised that way, and, in the caste system of the South, family name and accomplishments were often the most important consideration in marriage. In some cases they were the only consideration.

Though she had quietly rebelled against this idea since child? hood and had dated a few men best described as reckless, she found herself drawn to Lon's easy ways and had gradually come to love him. Despite the long hours he worked, he was good to her. He was a gentleman, mature and responsible, and during those terrible periods of the war when she needed someone to hold her, he never once turned her away. She felt secure with him and knew he loved her as well and that was why she had accepted his proposal.

Thinking these things made her feel guilty about being here, and she knew she should pack her things and leave before she changed her mind. She picked up her handbag, hesitated and almost made it to the door. But coincidence had pushed her here, and she put the bag down, again realizing that if she quit now she would always wonder what would have happened. She couldn't live with that

She went to the bathroom and started a bath. After checking the temperature she walked to the chest of drawers in the bedroom, taking off her gold earrings as she crossed the room. She found her sponge bag, opened it and pulled out a razor and a bar of soap, then undressed in front of the chest of drawers. She looked at herself in the mirror. Her body was firm and well proportioned, breasts softly rounded, stomach flat, legs slim. She'd inherited her mother's high cheekbones, smooth skin and blonde hair, but her best feature was her

own. She had “eyes like ocean waves”, as Lon liked to say.

Taking the razor and soap, she went to the bathroom again, turned off the tap, set a towel where she could reach it and stepped gingerly into the bath.

She liked the way a bath relaxed her, and she slipped lower in the water. The day had been long and her back was tense, but she was pleased she had finished shopping so quickly. She had to go back to Raleigh with something tangible, and the things she had picked out would work fine. She made a mental note to find the names of some other stores in the Beaufort area, then suddenly doubted she would need to. Lon wasn’t the type to check up on her.

She reached for the soap, lathered up and began to shave her legs. As she did, she thought about her parents and what they would think of her behaviour. No doubt they would disapprove, especially her mother. Her mother had never really accepted what had happened the summer they’d spent here and wouldn’t accept it now; no matter what reason she gave.

She soaked a while longer in the bath before finally getting out and towelling off. She went to the closet and looked for a dress, finally choosing a long yellow one that dipped slightly in the front, the kind that was common in the South. She slipped it on and looked in the mirror, turning from side to side. It fitted her well, but she eventually decided against it and put it back on the hanger. Instead she found a more casual, less revealing dress and put that on. Light blue with a touch of lace, it buttoned up at the front, and though it didn’t look quite as nice as the first one, it conveyed an image she thought would be more appropriate.

She wore little make-up, just a touch of eye shadow and mas? cara to accent her eyes. Perfume next, not too much. She found a pair of small hooped earrings, put those on, then slipped on the tan, low-heeled sandals she had been wearing earlier. She brushed her blonde hair, pinned it up and looked in the mirror. No, it was too much, she thought, and she let it back down. Better.

When she was finished she stepped back and evaluated herself. She looked good: not too dressy, not too casual. She didn’t want to overdo it. After all, she didn’t know what to expect. It had been a long time—probably too long—and many 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.

She found her handbag 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. She nearly 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 want to arrive after dark—but she needed a little more time.

"Damn," she whispered. "What am I doing here? I shouldn't be here. There's no reason for it." But once she said it she knew it wasn't true. If nothing else, she would have her answer.

She opened her handbag and thumbed through it until she came to a folded-up piece of newspaper. After taking it out slowly, almost reverently, she unfolded it and stared at it for a while. "This is why," she finally said to herself, "this is what it's all about."

NOAH GOT UP at five and kayaked for an hour up Brices Creek, as he usually did. When he finished he changed into his work clothes, warmed some bread rolls from the day before, grabbed a couple of apples and washed his breakfast down with two cups of coffee.

He worked on the fencing again, repairing the posts. It was an Indian summer, the temperature over eighty degrees, and by lunchtime he was hot and tired and glad of the break.

He ate at the creek because the mullets were jumping. He liked to watch them jump three or four limes and glide through the air before vanishing into the brackish water. For some reason he had always been pleased by the fact that their instinct hadn't changed for thousands, maybe tens of thousands, of years.

Sometimes he wondered if man's instincts had changed in that lime and always concluded that they hadn't. At least in the basic, most primal ways. As far as he could tell, man had always been aggressive, always striving to dominate, trying to control the world and everything in it. The war in Europe and Japan proved that.

He stopped working a little after three and walked to a small shed that sat near his dock. He went in, found his fishing pole, a couple of lures and some live crickets he kept on hand, then walked out to the dock, baited his hook and cast his line.

Fishing always made him reflect on his life, and he did so now. After his mother died he could remember spending his days in a dozen different homes. For one reason or another, he stuttered badly as a child and was teased for it. He began to speak less and less, and by the age of five he wouldn't speak at all. When he started classes,

his teachers thought he was retarded and recom?mended that he be pulled out of school.

Instead, his father took matters into his own hands. He kept him in school and afterwards made him come to the timber yard where he worked, to haul and stack wood. “It’s good that we spend some time together,” he would say as they worked side-by-side, “just like my daddy and I did.”

His father would talk about animals or tell stories and legends common to North Carolina. Within a few months Noah was speak? ing again, though not well, and his father decided to teach him to read with books of poetry. “Learn to read this aloud and you’ll be able to say anything you want to.” His father had been right again, and by the following year Noah had lost his stutter. But he contin?ued to go to the timber yard every day simply because his father was there, and in the evenings he would read the works of Whit?man and Tennyson aloud as his father rocked beside him. He had been reading poetry ever since.

When he got a little older he spent most of his weekends and vacations alone. He explored the Croatan forest in his first canoe, following Brices Creek for twenty miles until he could go no fur?ther, then hiked the remaining miles to the coast. Camping and exploring became his passion, and he spent hours in the forest, whistling quietly and playing his guitar for beavers and geese and wild blue herons. Poets knew that isolation in nature, far from people and things man-made, was good for the soul, and he’d always identified with poets.

Although he was quiet, years of heavy lifting at the timber yard helped him excel in sports, and his athletic success led to popularity. He enjoyed the football and track meets, and, though most of his teammates spent their free time together as well, he rarely joined them. He had a few girlfriends in school but none had ever made an impression on him. Except for one. And she came after graduation.

Allie. His Allie.

He remembered talking to Fin about Allie after they left the festival that first night, and Fin had laughed. Then he’d made two predictions: first that they would fall in love, and second that it wouldn’t work out.

There was a slight tug at his line and Noah hoped for a large-mouth bass, but the tugging eventually stopped and, after reeling his line in and checking the bait, he cast again.

Fin ended up being right on both counts. Most of the summer

she had to make excuses to her parents whenever they wanted to see each other. It wasn't that they didn't like him—it was that he was from a different class, too poor, and they would never approve if their daughter became serious with someone like him. "I don't care what my parents think, I love you and always will," she would say. "We'll find a way to be together."

But in the end they couldn't. By early September the tobacco had been harvested and she had no choice but to return with her family to Winston-Salem. "Only the summer is over, Allie, not us," he'd said the morning she left. "We'll never be over." But they were. For a reason he didn't understand, the letters he wrote went unanswered.

He decided to leave New Bern to help get her off his mind, and also because the Depression made earning a living in New Bern almost impossible. He went first to Norfolk and worked at a ship? yard for six months before he was laid off, then moved to New Jersey because he'd heard the economy wasn't so bad there.

He found a job in a scrap yard, separating scrap metal from everything else. The owner, a Jewish man named Morris Goldman, was intent on collecting as much scrap metal as he could, con?vinced that a war was going to start in Europe and that America would be dragged in again. Noah didn't care. He was just happy to have a job.

He worked hard. Not only did it help him keep his mind off Allie during the day, but it was something he felt he had to do. His daddy had always said: "Give a day's work for a day's pay. Any?thing less is stealing." That attitude pleased his boss. "It's a shame you aren't Jewish," Goldman would say, "you're such a fine boy in so many other ways." It was the best compliment Goldman could give.

He continued to think about Allie at night. He wrote to her once a month but never received a reply. Eventually he wrote one final letter and forced himself to accept the fact that the summer they'd spent with one another was the only thing they'd ever share.

Still, though, she stayed with him. Three years after the last letter, he went to Winston-Salem in the hope of finding her. He went to her house, discovered that she had moved and, after talk?ing to some neighbours, finally called her father's firm. The girl who answered was new and didn't recognize the name, but she poked around the personnel files for him. She found out that Allie's father had left the company and that no forwarding address was listed. That was the first and last time he ever looked for her.

For the next eight years he worked for Goldman. As the years dragged on, the company grew and he was promoted. By 1940 he had mastered the business and was running the entire operation, brokering the deals and managing a staff of thirty. The yard had become the largest scrap-metal dealer on the east coast.

During that time he dated a few different women. He became serious with one, a waitress from the local diner with deep blue eyes and silky black hair. Although they dated for two years and had many good times together, he never came to feel the same way about her as he did about Allie. She was a few years older than he was, and it was she who taught him the ways to please a woman, the places to touch and kiss, the things to whisper.

Towards the end of their relationship she'd told him once, "I wish I could give you what you're looking for, but I don't know what it is. There's a part of you that you keep closed off from everyone, including me. It's as if your' mind is on someone else. It's like you keep waiting for her to pop out of thin air to take you away from all this. . ." A month later she visited him at work and told him she'd met someone else. He understood. They parted as friends, and the following year he received a postcard from her saying she was married. He hadn't heard from her since.

In December 1941, when he was twenty-six, the war began, just as Goldman had predicted. Noah walked into his office the follow? ing month and informed Goldman of his intent to enlist, then returned to New Bern to say goodbye to his father. Five weeks later he found himself in training camp. While there, he received a letter from Goldman thanking him for his work, together with a copy of a certificate entitling him to a small percentage of the scrap yard if it was ever sold. "I couldn't have done it without you," the letter said. "You're the finest young man who ever worked for me, even if you aren't Jewish."

He spent his next three years with Patton's Third Army, tramp? ing through deserts in North Africa and forests in Europe with thirty pounds on his back, his infantry unit never far from action.

He watched his friends die around him; watched as some of them were buried thousands of miles from home.

He remembered the war ending in Europe, then a few months later in Japan. Just before he was discharged he received a letter from a lawyer in New Jersey representing Morris Goldman. Upon meeting the lawyer he found out that Goldman had died a year earlier and his

estate had been liquidated. The business had been sold, and Noah was given a cheque for almost seventy thousand dollars.

The following week he returned to New Bern and bought the house. He remembered bringing his father around later, pointing out the changes he intended to make. His father seemed weak as he walked, coughing and wheezing. Noah was concerned, but his father told him not to worry, assuring him that he had the flu.

Less than one month later his father died of pneumonia and was buried next to his wife in the local cemetery. Noah tried to stop by regularly to leave some flowers; occasionally he left a note. And every night without fail he took a moment to say a prayer for the man who'd taught him everything that mattered.

AFTER REELING in the line, he put the gear away and went back to the house. His neighbour, Martha Shaw, was there to thank him, bringing three loaves of homemade bread in appreciation for what he'd done. Her husband had been killed in the war, leaving her with three children and a shack to raise them in. Winter was com?ing, and he'd spent a few days at her place last week repairing her roof, replacing broken windows and sealing the others, and fixing her wood stove. He hoped it would be enough to get them through.

Once she'd left, he got into his battered Dodge truck and went to see Gus. He always stopped there when he was going to the store, because Gus's family didn't have a car. One of the daughters hopped up and rode with him, and they did their shopping at Capers General Store.

When he got home he didn't unpack the groceries right away. Instead he showered, found a Budweiser and a book by Dylan Thomas, and went to sit on the porch.

SHE STILL had trouble believing it, even as she held the proof in her hands. It had been in the newspaper at her parents' house three Sundays ago. She had gone to the kitchen to get a cup of coffee, and when she'd returned to the table her father had smiled and pointed at a small picture. "Remember this?"

He handed her the paper and, after an uninterested first glance, something in the picture caught her eye and she took a closer look. "It can't be," she whispered, and when her father looked at her curiously she ignored him, sat down and read the article without speaking. She vaguely remembered her mother coming to the table and sitting opposite her, and when she finally put aside the paper her mother was staring at her. "Are you okay?" she asked over her coffee cup. "You

look a little pale."

Allie didn't answer right away, she couldn't, and it was then that she'd noticed her hands were shaking. That had 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, remember?ing 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 behaviour 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 a couple of days. The wedding plans were stressful to everyone involved. Almost five hundred people were invited, including the governor, one senator and the ambassador to Peru. It was too much, in her opinion, but their engagement was news and had dominated the social pages since they had announced their plans six months ago.

She took a deep breath and stood again. "It's now or never," she whispered, then picked up her things and went to the door. She went downstairs and the manager smiled as she walked by. She could feel his eyes on her as she went out to her car. She slipped behind the wheel, started the engine and turned right onto Front Street.

She still knew her way around the small town, even though she hadn't been here in years. After crossing the Trent River on an old-fashioned drawbridge, she turned onto a gravel road that wound its way between antebellum farms, and she knew that, for some of the farmers, life hadn't changed since before their grandparents were born. The constancy of the place brought back a flood of memories as she recognized landmarks she'd long ago forgotten.

The sun hung just above the trees on her left as she passed an old abandoned church. She had explored it that summer, looking for souvenirs of the War between the States, and, as she passed, the memories of that day became stronger, as if they'd happened yesterday.

A majestic oak tree on the riverbank came into view next, and the memories became more intense. It looked the same as it had back then, branches low and thick, stretching horizontally along the ground with moss draped over the limbs like a veil. She remembered sitting

beneath the tree on a hot July day with someone who looked at her with a longing that took everything else away. And it had been at that moment that she'd first fallen in love.

He was two years older than she was, and as she drove along this roadway-in-time, he slowly came into focus once again. He always looked older than he really was, she remembered thinking, slightly weathered, like a farmer coming home after hours in the field. He had the calloused hands and broad shoulders that came to those who worked hard for a living, and the first faint lines were beginning to form around dark eyes that seemed to read her every thought.

He was tall and strong, with light brown hair, and handsome in his own way, but it was his voice that she remembered most of all. He had read to her that day as they lay beneath the tree with an accent that was soft and fluent, almost musical in quality. She remembered closing her eyes, listening closely and letting the words he was reading touch her soul.

He thumbed through old books with dog-eared pages, books he'd read a hundred times. He'd read for a while, then stop, and the two of them would talk. She would tell him what she wanted in her life—her hopes and dreams for the future—and he would listen intently and then promise to make it all come true. And the way he said it made her believe him, and she knew then how much he meant to her.

Another turn in the road and she finally saw the house in the distance. It had changed dramatically from what she remembered. She slowed the car, turning into the long, tree-lined dirt drive.

She 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. When the light from the sun was behind him, he almost seemed to vanish into the scenery.

Her car continued forward slowly, then finally stopped beneath an oak tree that shaded the front of the house. She turned the key, never taking her eyes from him, and the engine sputtered to a halt. He stepped off the porch and began to approach her, walking easily, then suddenly stopped cold as she emerged from the car. For a long time all they could do was stare at each other without moving.

Allison Nelson, twenty-nine years old and engaged, a socialite, searching for answers, and Noah Calhoun, the dreamer, thirty-one, visited by the ghost that had come to dominate his life.

The Notebook

CHAPTER THREE: REUNION

NEITHER ONE of them moved as they faced each other.

He hadn't said anything, and for a second she thought he didn't recognize her. Suddenly she felt guilty about showing up this way, without warning, and it made it harder. She had thought that she would know what to say. But she didn't. Everything that came into her head seemed inappropriate, somehow lacking.

As she stared at him, she noticed how little he'd changed since she'd last seen him. He looked good, she thought. With his shirt tucked loosely into old faded jeans, she could see the same broad shoulders she remembered, tapering down to narrow hips and a flat stomach. He was tanned, too, as if he'd worked outside all summer, and, though his hair was a little thinner and lighter than she remembered, he looked the same as he had when she'd known him last.

She took a deep breath and smiled. "Hello, Noah. It's good to see you again."

He looked at her with amazement in his eyes. Then, after shaking his head slightly, he slowly began to smile. "You too," he stammered. He brought his hand to his chin, and she noticed he hadn't shaved. "It's really you, isn't it? I can't believe it..

She heard the shock in his voice as he spoke, and surprising her it all came together—being here, seeing him. She felt something twitch inside, something deep and old, something that made her dizzy for just a second. She caught herself fighting for control. She hadn't expected this to happen, didn't want it to happen. She was engaged now. She hadn't come here for this. Yet.

Yet the feeling went on despite herself, and for a brief moment she felt fifteen again. Felt as she hadn't in years, as if all her dreams could still come true. Felt as though she'd finally come home.

Without another word they came together, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and he put his arms around her, drawing her close. They held each other tightly; both of them letting the fourteen years of separation dissolve in the deepening twilight.

They stayed like that for a long time before she finally pulled back to look at him. Up close, she could see the changes she hadn't noticed at first. His face had lost the softness of youth. The faint lines around his eyes had deepened. There was a new edge to him; he

seemed less innocent, more cautious, and yet the way he was holding her made her realize how much she'd missed him.

Her eyes brimmed with tears as they finally released each other. She laughed nervously while wiping the corners of her eyes.

"Are you okay?" he asked, a thousand other questions on his face.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to cry.

"It's okay," he said, smiling. "I still can't believe it's you. How did you find me?"

She stepped back, trying to compose herself, wiping away the last of her tears. "I saw the story on the house in the Raleigh paper a couple of weeks ago, and I had to come and see you again."

Noah smiled broadly. "I'm glad you did." He stepped back. "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.

"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.

She turned away and took a deep breath, wondering how to say it, and when she finally started, her voice was quiet. "Noah, before you get the wrong idea, I did want to see you again, but there's more to it than just that." She paused for a second. "I came here for a reason. There's something I have to tell you."

"What is it?"

She looked away and didn't answer for a moment, surprised that she couldn't tell him just yet. In the silence, Noah felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. Whatever it was, it was bad.

"I don't know how to say it. I thought I did at first, but now I'm not so sure..

The air was suddenly rattled by the sharp cry of a raccoon, and Clem came out from under the porch, barking gruffly. Both of them turned at the commotion, and Allie was glad for the distraction.

"Is he yours?" she asked.

Noah nodded, feeling the tightness in his stomach. "Actually it's a she. Clementine's her name. But yeah, she's all mine." They both watched as Clem stretched, then wandered towards the sounds. Allie's eyes widened just a bit when she saw her limp away.

“What happened to her leg?” she asked, stalling for time.

“Hit by a car a few months back. Doc Harrison, the vet, called me to see if I wanted her because her owner didn’t any more. After I saw what had happened, I guess I just couldn’t let her be put down."

“You were always nice like that,” she said, trying to relax. She looked past him towards the house. “You did a wonderful job restoring it. It looks perfect, just like I knew it would some day.”

He turned his head in the same direction as hers while he wondered about the small talk and what she was holding back.

“Thanks, that’s nice of you. It was quite a project, though. I don’t know if I would do it again.”

“Of course you would,” she said. She knew exactly how he felt about this place. But then she knew how he felt about everything— or at least she had a long time ago.

And with that she realized they were strangers now. Fourteen years apart was a long time. Too long.

“What is it, Allie?” He turned to her, 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.”

She hesitated and looked to his front door. “Do you need to tell anyone?”

He shook his head. “There’s no one to tell. It’s just me and Clem.”

Even though she had asked, she had suspected there wouldn’t be anyone else, and inside she didn’t know how to feel about that. But it did make what she wanted to say a little harder. It would have been easier if there was someone else.

They started towards the river and turned onto a path near the bank. She let go of his hand and walked on with just enough distance between them so that they couldn’t accidentally touch.

He looked at her. She was still pretty, with thick hair and soft

eyes, and she moved so gracefully that it seemed as though she were gliding. He'd seen beautiful women before, 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 years in Europe."

She looked at him with questions in her eyes. "The war?"

He nodded and she went on.

"I thought you might be there. I'm glad you made it out okay."

"Me too," he said.

"Are you glad to be back home?"

"Yeah. My roots are here. This is where I'm supposed to be." He paused. "But what about you?" He asked the question softly, suspecting the worst.

It was a long moment before she answered. "I'm engaged."

He looked down when she said it, suddenly feeling just a bit weaker. So that was it. That's what she needed to tell him.

"Congratulations," he finally said, wondering how convincing he sounded. "When's the big day?"

"Three weeks. Lon wanted a November wedding."

"Lon?"

"Lon Hammond Junior. My fiancé"

He nodded. The Hammonds were one of the most powerful and influential families in the state. Cotton money. Unlike that of his own father, the death of Lon Hammond Senior had made the front page of the newspaper.

"I've heard of them. His father built quite a business. Did Lon take over for him?"

She shook her head. "No, he's a lawyer. He has his own practice."

"With his name, he must be busy."

"He is. He works a lot."

He thought he heard something in her tone, and the next question came automatically. “Does he treat you well?”

She didn’t answer right away, as if she were considering the question for the first time. Then: “Yes. He’s a good man, Noah. You’d like him.”

Her voice was distant when she answered, or at least he thought it was. Noah wondered if it was just his mind playing tricks on him.

“How’s your daddy doing?” she asked.

Noah took a couple of steps before answering. “He passed on earlier this year, right after I got back.”

“I’m sorry,” she said softly.

He nodded, and they walked on in silence.

They reached the top of the hill and stopped. The oak tree was in the distance, with the sun glowing orange behind it. Allie could feel his eyes on her as she stared in that direction.

“A lot of memories there, Allie.”

She smiled. “I know. I saw it when I came in. Do you remember the day we spent there?”

“Yes,” he answered, volunteering no more.

“Do you ever think about it?”

"Sometimes,” he said. “Usually when I’m working out this way.

It sits on my property now.”

"You bought it?”

I just couldn’t bear to see it turned into kitchen cabinets.”

She laughed under her breath, feeling strangely pleased about that. “Do you still read poetry?

He nodded. “Yeah. I never stopped. I guess it’s in my blood.”

“Do you know, you’re the only poet I’ve ever met.”

“I’m no poet. I read, but I can’t write a verse. I’ve tried.”

“You’re still a poet, Noah Taylor Calhoun.” Her voice softened.

“I still think about it a lot. It was the first time anyone ever read poetry to me. In fact, it’s the only time.”

Her comment made both of them drift back and remember as they slowly circled back to the house, following a new path that passed near the dock.

As the sun 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 flanc6 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. It was one thing to come and visit, but it was an entirely different matter to hide the truth from her fiancé.

The gravel crunched beneath their feet as they walked. 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 him. I won’t try to stop you from going back to him. But if there’s a part of you that isn’t sure, then don’t do it. This isn’t the kind of thing you go into halfway.”

Her answer came almost too quickly. “I’m making the right decision. Noah.”

He stared for a second, wondering if he believed her. Then he nodded and they began to walk again. He said: I’m not making this easy for you, am I.?”

She smiled a little. "It’s okay. I really can’t blame you.”

“I’m sorry anyway.”

"Don’t be. There’s no reason to be sorry. I’m the one who should be apologizing. Maybe I should have written.”

He shook his head. "I’m glad you came. It’s good to see you again. You were the best friend I ever had, Allie. I’d still like to be friends, even if you are engaged, and even if it is just for a couple of days. How about we just kind of get to know each other again?”

She thought about it, and decided that since he knew about her engagement, it would probably be all right. Or at least not wrong.

She smiled slightly and nodded. "I’d like that.”

"Good. How about dinner? I know a place that serves the best crab in town.”

"Sounds great. Where?”

"My house. I’ve had the traps out all week, and I saw that I had some good ones caged a couple of days ago. Do you mind?”

"No, that sounds fine.”

He smiled and pointed over his shoulder with his thumb.

"Great. They’re at the dock. I’ll just be a couple of minutes.”

Allie watched him walk away and noticed the tension she'd felt when telling him about her engagement beginning to fade. Closing her eyes, she ran her hands through her hair and let the breeze fan her cheek. She took a deep breath and held it for a moment, feeling the muscles in her shoulders relax as she exhaled. Finally, opening her eyes, she stared at the beauty that surrounded her. She always loved evenings like this, when the faint aroma of autumn leaves rode on soft southern winds. She loved the trees and the sounds they made. Listening to them helped her relax even more. After a moment, she turned towards the dock and looked at Noah.

God, he looked good. Even after all this time.

She watched him as he reached for a rope that hung in the water. He began to pull it, and despite the darkening sky she saw the muscles in his arm flex as he lifted the cage from the water. He let it hang over the river for a moment and shook it, letting most of the water escape. After setting the trap on the dock, he opened it and began to remove the crabs one by one, placing them into a bucket.

She looked around and realized she had forgotten how fresh and beautiful everything seemed here. Over her shoulder, as she walked over to join Noah, she saw he had left a couple of lights on in the house. It seemed to be the only house around. At least the only one with electricity.

She stepped on the dock and it creaked under her foot. The sound reminded her of a rusty squeezebox. Noah glanced up, then went back to checking the crabs, making sure they were the right size. She walked to the rocker that sat on the dock and touched it, running her hand along the back. She could picture him sitting in it, fishing, thinking, reading. It was old and weather-beaten, rough-feeling. She wondered how much time he spent here alone, and about his thoughts at times like those.

A compulsion had driven her here, and for the first time in three weeks the feeling was gone. She'd needed Noah to know about her engagement, to understand, to accept it—she was sure of that now. While thinking of him, she was reminded of something they shared the summer they were together. With head down, she paced around slowly until she found it—the carving. Noah loves Allie, in a heart. Carved into the dock a few days before she'd left.

A breeze broke the stillness and chilled her, making her cross her arms. She stood that way, alternately looking down at the caning and then towards the river, until she heard him reach her side. She could

feel his closeness, his warmth.

"It's so peaceful here," she said, her voice dreamlike.

"I know. I come down here a lot now just to be close to the water. It makes me feel good. Come on, let's go. The mosquitoes are getting vicious, and I'm starved."

THE SKY had turned black and they started towards the house. In the silence Allie's mind wandered and she felt a little light-headed. She wondered what he was thinking about her being here and wasn't exactly sure if she knew herself. When they reached the house a couple of minutes later, Clem greeted them on the back porch.

Noah set the bucket by the door, then led the way inside to the kitchen. It was on the right, large and smelling of new wood. The cabinets had been done in oak, like the floor, and the windows were large and faced east, allowing the light from the morning sun. It was a tasteful restoration, not overdone as was so often the case 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."

She toured the house for the next few minutes, walking through the rooms, noticing how wonderful it looked. She came down the stairs, turned towards 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 second before going on. Damn, she thought, get a hold of yourself. Remember that you're engaged now.

He was standing by the counter; a couple of cabinet doors open wide, empty grocery bags on the floor, whistling quietly.

"It's unbelievable, Noah. How long did the restoration take?"

He looked up from the last bag he was unpacking. "Almost a year."

"Did you do it all yourself?"

He laughed. "No. I always thought I would when I was young, and I started that way. But it was just too much. It would have taken years, and so I ended up hiring some people. . . actually a lot of people. But even with them it was still a lot of work, and most of the time I didn't stop until past midnight."

"Why'd you work so hard?"

Ghosts, he wanted to say, but didn't.

"I don't know. Just wanted to finish, I guess. Do you want anything to drink before I start dinner?"

“What do you have?”

“Not much, really. Beer, tea, coffee.”

“Tea sounds good.”

He gathered the grocery bags and put them away, then walked to a small room off the kitchen before returning with a box of tea. He pulled out a couple of tea bags and put them by the stove, then filled the kettle. After standing it on the burner, he lit a match and she heard the sound of flames as they came to life.

“It’ll be just a minute,” he said, “this stove heats up pretty quick.”

“That’s fine.”

When the kettle whistled, he poured two cups and handed one to her. She smiled and took a sip.

“I’m going to get the crabs in to marinate for a few minutes before I steam ‘em,” he said, putting his cup on the counter. He went to the cupboard and removed a large pot with a steamer and lid. He brought the pot to the sink, added water, then carried it to the stove.

“Can I give you a hand with something?”

He answered over his shoulder: “Sure. How about cutting up some vegetables to fry. There’s plenty in the icebox, and you can find a bowl over there.”

He motioned to the cabinet near the sink, and she took another sip of tea before setting her cup on the counter and retrieving the bowl. She carried it to the icebox and found some okra, courgettes, onions and carrots on the bottom shelf. Noah joined her in front of the open door, and she moved to make room for him. She could smell him as he stood next to her—clean, familiar, distinctive—and felt his arm brush against her as he leaned over and reached inside. He removed a beer and a bottle of hot sauce, then returned to the stove.

Noah opened the beer and poured it in the water, then added the hot sauce and some other seasoning. After stirring the water to make sure the powders dissolved, he went to the back door to get the crabs.

He paused for a moment before going back inside and stared at Allie, watching her cut the carrots. As he did that, he wondered again why she had come, especially now that she was engaged. None of this made much sense to him. But then Allie had always been surprising.

He smiled, remembering the way she had been. Fiery, spontaneous, passionate—as he imagined most artists to be. And she was definitely that. Artistic talent like hers was a gift. He remembered seeing some paintings in the museums in New York and thinking that

her work was just as good.

She had given him a painting before she'd left that summer. It hung above the fireplace in the living room. She'd called it a picture of her dreams, and to him it had seemed extremely sensual. When he looked at it, and he often did late in the evening, he could see desire in the colours and the lines, and if he focused carefully he could imagine what she had been thinking with every stroke.

A dog barked in the distance, and Noah realized he had been standing with the door open a long time. He closed it quickly and went into the kitchen.

"How's it going?" he asked, seeing she was nearly finished.

"Good. I'm almost done here. Anything else for dinner?"

"I have some homemade bread that I was planning on. From a neighbour," he added as he put the pail in the sink. He began to rinse the crabs, holding them under the tap, 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?"

"No. Just grab 'em like this," he said, demonstrating.

She smiled. "I forget you've done this your whole life."

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 them marinate for a half-hour."

"Sure," she said.

He wiped his hands, and together they went to the back porch. Noah flicked 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 a refill and a beer for himself. He held out the cup and she took it, sipping again before she put it on the table beside the chairs.

"You were sitting out here when I came, weren't you?"

"Yeah. I sit out here every night. It's a habit now."

"I can see why," she said as she looked around. "So, what is it you do these days?"

"Actually, I don't do anything but work on the house right now.

It satisfies my creative urges."

"How can you... I mean..."

"Morris Goldman. My old boss from up north. He offered me a

part of the business just as I enlisted, and died before I got home. When I got back to the states, his lawyers gave me a cheque big enough to buy this place and fix it up."

She laughed under her breath. "You always told me you'd find a way to do it."

They both sat quietly for a moment, thinking back again. Allie took another sip of tea.

"Do you remember sneaking over here the night you first told me about this place?"

He nodded, and she went on: "I got home a little late that evening, and my parents were furious when I finally came in. I can still picture my daddy standing in the living room smoking a cigarette, my mother on the sofa staring straight ahead. I swear, they looked as if a family member had died. That was the first time my parents knew I was serious about you, and my mother had a long talk with me later that night. She said to me, 'I'm sure you think that I don't understand what you're going through, but I do. It's just that sometimes our future is dictated by what we are, as opposed to what we want.' I remember being really hurt when she said that."

"You told me about it the next day. It hurt my feelings, too. I liked your parents and I had no idea they didn't like me."

"It wasn't that they didn't like you. They didn't think you deserved me."

"There's not much difference."

"I know that I always did. Maybe that's why my mother and I always seem to have a distance between us when we talk."

"How do you feel about it now?"

"The same as I did back then. That it's wrong, that it isn't fair. It was a terrible thing for a girl to learn, that status is more important than feelings."

Noah said nothing.

"I've thought about you ever since that summer," she said.

"You have?"

"Why wouldn't you think so?" She seemed genuinely surprised.

"You never answered my letters."

"You wrote?"

"Dozens of letters. I wrote to you for two years without receiving a single reply."

She slowly shook her head before lowering her eyes. "I didn't know.. ." she said finally, 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 trying to protect my feelings, and she probably thought the best way to do that was to hide the letters you sent."

"That wasn't her decision to make," he said quietly.

"I know."

"Would it have made a difference even if you'd got them?"

"Of course. I always wondered what you were up to."

"No, I mean with us. Do you think we would have made it'?"

It took a moment for her to answer. "I don't know, Noah. I really don't, and you don't either. We're not the same people we were then. We've changed. Both of us."

She paused. He didn't respond, and in the silence she looked towards the creek. She went on. "But yes, Noah, I think we would have. At least, I'd like to think we would have."

He nodded, looked down, then turned away. "What's Lon like?"

She hesitated, not expecting the question. Bringing up Lon's name brought slight feelings of guilt to the surface, and for a moment she didn't know how to answer. She reached for her cup, took another sip of tea, then spoke quietly.

"Lon's handsome, charming and successful. He's kind to me, he makes me laugh, and I know he loves me in his own way." She collected her thoughts. "But there's always going to be something missing in our relationship."

She surprised herself with her answer but knew it was true nonetheless. And she also knew by looking at him that Noah had suspected the answer in advance when he asked, "Why?"

She shrugged and her voice was barely above a whisper. "I guess I still look for the kind of love we had that summer."

Noah thought about what she had said, thought about the relationships he'd had since he'd last seen her.

"How about you'?" she asked. "Did you ever think about us?"

"All the time. I still do."

"Are you seeing anyone'?"

“No,” he answered, shaking his head. He finished his beer. “I’m going to go and start the water. Can I get you anything’?”

She shook her head, and Noah went to the kitchen and put the crabs in the steamer and the bread in the oven. He found some flour and cornflour for the vegetables, coated them, and put some fat into the frying pan. After turning the heat on low, he set a timer and pulled another beer from the icebox before heading back to the porch. And while he was doing those 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 that 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 before 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 any more.

“It’s going to take a few minutes,” he said as he sat 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, do you still paint?”

She shook her head. “Not any more.”

He was stunned. “Why not? You have so much talent.”

“It’s a long story.”

“I’ve got all night,” he answered.

“Did you really think I was talented?” she asked quietly.

“C’mon,” he said, reaching out for her hand. “I want to show you something.”

She got up and followed him through the door to the living room. He stopped in front of the fireplace and pointed to the painting that hung above the mantelpiece. She gasped, surprised she hadn’t noticed it earlier, more surprised it was here at all.

“You kept it’?”

“Of course I kept it. It’s wonderful.”

She gave him a sceptical look, and he explained. “It makes me feel alive when I look at it. Sometimes I have to get up and touch it. It’s just so real—the shapes, the shadows, the colours. It’s incredible, Allie. You mean to tell me no one has ever told you that before?”

“My professor did,” she said, “but I guess I didn’t believe him.” He knew there was more. Allie looked away before continuing “I’ve been drawing and painting since I was a child. I guess that once I got a little older I began to think I was good at it. I enjoyed it too. I remember working on this painting that summer, adding to it every day, changing it as our relationship changed. I don’t even remember how it started or what I wanted it to be, but somehow it evolved into this.

“I remember being unable to stop painting after I went home that summer. I think it was my way of avoiding the pain I was going through. Anyway. I ended up majoring in art in college because it was something I had to do; I remember spending hours in the studio all by myself and enjoyed every minute. I loved the freedom I felt when I created, the way it made me feel to make something beautiful. Just before I graduated, my professor, who happened to also be the critic for the paper, told me I had a lot of talent. He told me I should try my luck as an artist. But I didn’t listen to him.”

She stopped for a moment, gathering her thoughts.

‘My parents didn’t think it was proper for someone like me to paint for a living. I just stopped after a while. I haven’t touched a brush in years.” She stared at the painting. “I’m not sure if I can paint any more. It’s been a long time.”

“You can still do it. Allie. I know you can. You have a talent that comes from inside you, from your heart, not from your fingers. What you have can’t ever go away. It’s what other people only dream about. You’re an artist, Allie.”

The words were spoken with such sincerity that she knew he wasn’t saying it just to be nice. He truly believed in her ability, and

for some reason that meant more to her than she expected. She turned to face him. She reached over and touched his hand, hesitantly, gently, amazed that after all these years had somehow known exactly what she'd needed to hear. When their eyes locked, she once again realized how special he was.

And for just a fleeting moment, a tiny wisp of time that hung in the air like fireflies in summer skies, she wondered if she was in love with him again.

THE TIMER WENT off in the kitchen, and Noah turned away, strangely affected by what had just happened between them. Her eyes had spoken to him and whispered something he longed to hear; yet he couldn't stop the voice inside his head, her voice that had told him of her love for another man. He silently cursed the timer as he walked to the kitchen and removed the bread from the oven. He saw that the frying pan was ready. He added the vegetables and heard them begin to crackle. Then he got some but?ter out of the icebox, spread some on the bread and melted a hit more for the crabs.

Allie had followed him into the kitchen and cleared her throat.

"Can I get the table ready?"

Noah used the bread knife as a pointer. "Sure, plates are over there. Utensils and napkins there. Make sure you get plenty— crabs can be messy." He couldn't look at her as he spoke. He didn't want to be mistaken about what had just happened between them.

Allie too, was wondering about the moment and feeling warm as she thought of it. The words he'd spoken replayed in her head as she found everything she needed for the table settings. Noah handed her the bread and their fingers touched briefly.

He turned his attention back to the frying pan and stirred the vegetables. He lifted the lid of the steamer, saw the crabs still had a minute, and let them cook some more. He was more composed now and returned to small talk, easy conversation.

"Have you ever had crab before?"

"A couple of times. But only in salads."

He laughed. "Then you're in for an adventure. Hold on a sec? ond." He disappeared upstairs for a moment, then returned with a navy-blue button-down shirt. He held it out for her.

"Here, put this on. I don't want you to stain your dress."

Allie put it on and smelt the fragrance that lingered in the shirt— his smell, distinctive, natural.

"Don't worry." he said, seeing her expression, "it's clean."

She laughed. “I know. It just reminds me of our first real date. You gave me your jacket that night, remember?”

He nodded.

The vegetables and crabs were ready at 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.”

“A good bug, though,” he said. “Here, let me show you how it’s done.”

He made it look easy, removing the meat and putting it on her plate. Allie crushed the legs too hard the first time and had to use her fingers to get the shells away from the meat. She felt clumsy, worrying that he saw every mistake, but then she realized her own insecurity. He didn’t care about things like that He never had. “So, tell me everything you’ve been up to since I saw you last,” she asked.

They started to talk then, making up for lost time. Noah talked about leaving New Bern, about working in the shipyard and at the scrap yard in New Jersey. He spoke fondly of Morris Goldman and touched on the war a little, and told her how much he missed his father. Allie talked about going to college, painting, and her hours spent volunteering at the hospital. She talked about her family and Mends and the charities she was involved with. Neither of them brought up anybody they had dated since they’d last seen each other. Even Lon was ignored, and though both of them noticed the omission, neither mentioned it.

Afterwards Allie tried to remember the last time she and Lon had talked this way. Although he listened well and they seldom argued, he was not the type of man to talk like this. Like her father, he wasn’t comfortable sharing feelings. She’d tried to explain that she needed to be closer to him, but it had never seemed to make a difference.

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 what she'd thought about his life, hoping it would somehow make a difference, if it could.

He got up and refilled the kettle. They both brought the dishes to the sink and cleaned the table, and he poured two more cups of hot water, adding tea bags to both.

"How about the porch again?" he asked, handing her the cup, and she agreed, leading the way.

He grabbed a quilt for her in case she got cold, and soon they had taken their places again, the quilt over her legs, rockers moving. Noah watched her from the corner of his eye. God, she's beautiful, he thought. And inside he ached.

For something had happened during dinner.

Quite simply, he had fallen in love again. He knew that now as they sat next to one another. Fallen in love with a new Allie, not just her memory. But then he had never really stopped, 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 glanced up at the stars, their twinkling lights reminding him that she would he 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.

"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. 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 he listened to that way. Poetry, she thought, wasn't written to he analysed: it was meant to inspire without reason, to touch without understanding.

They rocked for a while, drinking tea, sitting quietly, drifting in

their thoughts. The compulsion that had driven her here was gone now—she was glad of this—but she worried about the feelings that had taken its place, the stirrings that had begun to sift and swirl in her pores like gold dust in river pans. She'd tried to deny them, hide from them, but now she realized that she didn't want them to stop.

Lon could not evoke these feelings in her. He never had and probably never would. Maybe that was why she had never been to bed with him. She had always used the excuse that she wanted to wait until marriage. He took it well, usually, and she sometimes wondered how hurt he would be if he ever found out about Noah.

But there was something else that made her want to wait, and it had to do with Lon himself. He was driven in his work, and it always came first. For him there was no time for poems and wasted evenings on porches. She knew this was why he was successful, and part of her respected him for that. But she also sensed it wasn't enough. She wanted something more. Passion and romance, perhaps, or quiet conversations in candlelit rooms, or perhaps something as simple as not being second.

Noah, too, was sifting through his thoughts. As he rocked, he 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 revelled in it. 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 he 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 swallow of tea, feeling it warm her throat. She took the

evening in. Moon higher now, temperature dropping.

She looked at Noah. A scar was visible on the side of his face that hadn't been there before. She wondered if it had happened during the war. He hadn't mentioned it and she hadn't asked, mostly because she didn't want to imagine him being hurt.

"I should go," she finally said, handing the quilt back to him.

Noah nodded, then stood without a word. He carried the quilt, and the two of them walked to her car while fallen leaves crunched beneath their feet. She started to take off the shirt he'd lent her as he opened the door, but he stopped her.

"Keep it," he said. "I want you to have it."

She didn't ask why, because she wanted to keep it, too. She readjusted it and crossed her arms afterwards to ward off the chill. For some reason, as she stood there, she was reminded of standing on her front porch after a high-school dance, waiting for a kiss.

"I had a great time tonight," he said, "thank you for finding me."

"I did, too," she answered.

He summoned his courage. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

A simple question. She knew what the answer should be. "I don't think we should," was all she had to say, and it would end right here and now. But for a second the demon of choice confronted her, teased her, challenged her. Why couldn't she say it? As she looked in his eyes to find the answer she needed, she saw the man she'd once fallen in love with, and suddenly it all came clear.

"I'd like that."

Noah was surprised. He hadn't expected her to answer this way. He wanted to touch her then, to take her in his arms, but he didn't.

"Can you be here about noon?"

"Sure. What do you want to do?"

"You'll see," he answered. "I know just the place to go."

"Have I ever been there before?"

"No, but it's a special place. You'll love it."

She moved away before he could attempt a kiss. She didn't know if he would try but knew for some reason that, if he did, she would have a hard time stopping him. She slid behind the wheel, breathing a sigh of relief. He shut the door for her, and she started the engine. As the car idled, she rolled down the window just a hit.

"See you tomorrow," she said, her eyes reflecting the moonlight.

Noah waved as she turned the car around and then drove up the lane, heading hack towards town. He watched until the lights

vanished behind far-off oak trees and the engine noise was gone. Clem wandered up to him and he squatted down to pet her, paying special attention to her neck, scratching the spot she couldn't reach any more. Then they returned to the back porch side by side.

He sat in the rocker again, trying once more to fathom the evening that had just passed. Replaying it. Running it in slow motion. "She's engaged," he finally whispered, and then was silent for hours, his rocker making the only noise. The night was quiet, with little activity except for Clem, who checked on him occasionally as if to ask, "Are you all right?"

And some time after midnight on that clear October evening, Noah was overcome with longing. And if anyone had seen him, they would have seen what looked like an old man, someone who'd aged a lifetime in just a couple of hours. Someone bent over in his rocker with his face in his hands and tears in his eyes.

He didn't know how to stop them.

The Notebook

CHAPTER FOUR: PHONE CALLS

LON HUNG up the phone. He had called at seven, then at eight thirty, and now he checked his watch again. Nine forty-five.

Where was she?

He knew she was where she had said she would he because he had spoken to the manager. Yes, she had checked in and he had last seen her around six. Going to dinner, he thought. No, he hadn't seen her since.

Lon shook his head and leaned hack in his chair. He was the last one in the office as usual. That was normal with an ongoing trial, 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. Only a select few lawyers in the city had that kind of stature, and his earnings reflected it.

But most 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.

And now a little detail bothered him.

Not about the case. That was fine. It was something else. Something about Allie. But damn, he couldn't put his finger on it. Some time after her call, maybe an hour or so, something clicked in his mind. The little detail. Detail. . . . Something insignificant? Something important?

Think. . .. Damn, what was it?

His mind clicked. Something. . . something. . . something said?

Something had been said? Yes, that was it. But what was it? Had Allie said anything on the phone? That had been when it started, and he ran through the conversation again. What had she said? Her trip was good; she had checked in, had done some shopping. Left her number. That's about all.

He thought about her then. He loved her, he was sure of that. Not only was she beautiful and charming, but she'd become his source of stability and best friend as well. After a hard day at work, she was the first person he would call. She would listen to him, laugh at the right

moments, and had a sixth sense about what he needed to hear. He knew he should spend more time with her. But practising law made limiting his hours impossible. She'd always understood, but still he cursed himself for not making the time. Once he was married he'd shorten his hours, he promised himself. He'd have his secretary check his schedule to make sure he wasn't overextending himself.

Check? .

And his mind clicked another notch. Check . . . checking… . checking in? He looked to the ceiling. Checking in?

Yes, that was it. He closed his eyes and thought for a second. What, then? C'mon, don't fail now. Think, damn it, think.

New Bern.

The thought popped into his head. Yes. New Bern. That was it. The little detail, or part of it. What else, though?

New Bern, he thought again, and knew the name. Knew the town a little, mainly from a few trials he had been in. Stopped there a few times on the way to the coast. Nothing special. He and Allie had never been there together.

But Allie had been there before.

And the rack tightened its grip, another part coming together.

Allie, New Bern . . . and . . . something at a party. A comment in passing. From Allie's mother. What had she said?

Lon paled then, remembering. Remembering what Allie's mother had said so long ago. 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 more deeply than she loved Lon.

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

Yet . . . what if? Lon considered the other possibility, and for the first time in a long while he became frightened. What if she's with him?

He made up his mind then that he would do anything it took to keep her. She was everything he'd always needed, and he'd never find another quite like her.

So, with trembling hands, he dialled the phone for the fourth and

last time that evening.

And again there was no answer.

The Notebook

CHAPTER FIVE: KAYAKS AND FORGOTTEN DREAMS

ALLIE WOKE early the next morning. She'd slept in the shirt he'd given her, and she smelt him once again while thinking about the evening they'd spent together. The easy laughter and conversation came hack to her, and she especially remembered the way he'd talked about her painting. It was so unexpected, yet uplifting, and she realized how sorry she would have been had she decided not to see him again.

She looked out of the window and watched the chattering birds search for food in the early light. Noah, she knew, had always been a morning person. She knew he liked to kayak or canoe, and she remembered one morning she'd spent with him in his canoe, watching the sun come up. She'd had to sneak out of her window to do it because her parents wouldn't allow it, but she hadn't been caught and she remembered how Noah had slipped his arm around her and pulled her close as dawn began to unfold. "Look there," he'd whispered, and she'd watched her first sunrise with her head on his shoulder, wondering if anything could he better than that moment.

As she got out of bed to take her bath, feeling the cold floor beneath her feet, she wondered if he'd been on the water this morning watching another day begin, thinking somehow he probably had.

SHE WAS RIGHT. Noah was up before the sun and dressed quickly, same jeans as last night, undershirt, clean flannel shirt, blue jacket and boots. He drank a quick glass of milk and grabbed two biscuits on the way out of the door. After Clem greeted him with a couple of sloppy licks, he walked to the dock where his kayak was stored. He liked to let the river work its magic, loosening up his muscles, warming his body, clearing his mind.

The old kayak, well used and river-stained, hung on two rusty hooks attached to his dock, just above the water line. He lifted it free, inspected it quickly, then took it to the hank. In a couple of seasoned moves, long since mastered by habit, he had it in the water and was working his way upstream, paddling hard, working off the tension, preparing for the day.

Questions danced in his mind. He wondered about Lon and what type of man he was, wondered about their relationship. Most of all,

though, he wondered about Allie and why she had come.

By the time he reached home, he felt renewed. Checking his watch, he was surprised to find that it had taken two hours. Time always played tricks out there.

He hung the kayak to dry and went to the shed where he stored his two-man canoe. He carried it to the hank, leaving it a few feet from the water, and turned towards the house. In the western sky he 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 look of them he didn't want to he outside when they got here. Damn. How much time did he have? A few hours, maybe more.

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.

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. A canoe was no place to he when electricity sparked in humid air.

He finished his coffee, putting off the decision until later. He went to the toolshed and found his axe. After checking the blade by pressing his thumb to it, he sharpened it with a whetstone until it was ready.

He spent the next twenty minutes splitting and stacking logs. He did it easily, his strokes efficient, and didn't break a sweat. He put a few logs off to the side for later and brought them inside when he was finished, stacking them by the fireplace.

He looked at Allie's painting and reached out to touch it, bringing back the feelings of disbelief at seeing her again. God, what was it about her that made him feel this way? Even after all these years? What sort of power did she have over him?

He finally turned away, shaking his head, and went back to the porch. He checked the barometer again. It hadn't changed. Then he looked at his watch.

Allie should he here soon.

ALLIE SPENT the morning downtown. The Depression had taken its toll, but she could see signs of prosperity beginning to work their way hack. Fort Totten Park looked exactly the same as it had

fourteen years ago, and the kids who played on the swings after school probably looked the same as well. She smiled at the memory then, thinking back to when things were simpler. Or at least had seemed to be.

Now, nothing was simple. She wondered what she would have been doing now, had she never seen the article in the paper. It wasn't very difficult to imagine, because her routines seldom changed. It was Wednesday, which meant bridge at the country club, then on to the Junior Women's League, where they would probably he arranging another fund-raiser for the private school or hospital. After that, a visit to her mother, then home to get ready for dinner with Lon, because he made it a point to leave work by seven. It was the one night a week she saw him regularly.

She suppressed a feeling of sadness about that, hoping that one day he would change. He had often promised to and usually followed through for a few weeks before drifting back to the same schedule. "I can't tonight, honey." he would explain, "I'm sorry, but I can't. Let me make it up to you later."

She didn't like to argue, mostly because she knew he was telling the truth. Trial work was demanding, both beforehand and during, yet she couldn't help wondering sometimes why he had spent so much time courting her if he didn't want to spend time with her now.

She passed an art gallery on Front Street, 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.

She went inside and browsed among the paintings. Many of the artists were local, and there was a strong sea flavour to their works.

On one wall, though, there were a few paintings more suited to her tastes, by an artist she'd never heard of. Most appeared to have been inspired by the architecture of the Greek islands. In the painting she liked the best, she noted the artist had purposely exaggerated the scene with smaller-than-life figures, wide lines and heavy sweeps of vivid, swirling colour, drawing the eye, almost directing what it should see next. It was dynamic, dramatic. She considered buying it before she realized that she liked it because it reminded her of her own work. She examined it more closely and thought to herself that maybe Noah was right. Maybe she should start painting again.

At nine thirty Allie left the gallery and went to Hoffman-Lane, a department store. It took a few minutes to find what she was looking

for. Paper, drawing chalk and pencils, not high quality but good enough. It wasn't painting, but it was a start, and she was excited by the time she got back to her room.

She sat at the desk and started working: nothing specific, just getting the feel of it again, letting shapes and colours flow from the memory of her youth. After a few minutes, she did a rough sketch of the street scene as seen from her room, amazed at how easily it came. It was almost as if she'd never stopped.

She examined it when she was finished, pleased with the effort. She wondered what to try next and finally decided. Since she didn't have a model, she visualized it in her head before starting. And though it was harder than the street scene, it began to take form.

Minutes passed quickly. She worked steadily, checking the time frequently so she wouldn't be late, and finished it a little before noon. It had taken almost two hours, but the end result surprised her. It looked as though it had taken a great deal longer. After rolling it up, she put it in a bag and collected the rest of her things. On her way out of the door, she looked at herself in the mirror, feeling oddly relaxed, not exactly sure why.

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

She turned. The manager. The 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. He was concerned about you. He said he was your fiancé."

She smiled weakly, trying to hide what she was thinking. Four times? Four? What could that mean? What if something had happened back home? "Did he say anything? Is it an emergency?"

He shook his head quickly. "He really didn't say, miss. Actually, he sounded more concerned about you."

Good, she thought. That's good. And then, just as suddenly, a pang in her chest. Why so many calls? Had she said anything yesterday? Why would he be so persistent? It was completely unlike him. Was there any way he could have found out? No, that was impossible. Unless someone saw her here yesterday and called… But

they would have had to follow her out to Noah's. No one would have done that.

She had to call him now: no way to get around it. But she didn't want to. This was her time, and she wanted to spend it doing what she wanted. She hadn't planned on speaking to him until later, and she felt almost as if talking to him now would spoil the day. Besides, what was she going to say? How could she explain being out so late? A late dinner and then a walk? Maybe. Or a movie? Or.

"Miss?"

Almost noon, she thought. Where would he be? His office, probably . . . no. In court, she suddenly realized, and immediately felt as if she'd been released from shackles. There was no way she could talk to him, even if she wanted to. She was surprised by her feelings. She shouldn't feel this way, she knew, and yet it didn't bother her. She looked at her watch, acting now.

"Is it really almost twelve?"

The manager looked at the clock. "Yes, a quarter to."

"Unfortunately," she started, "he's in court right now and I can't reach him. If he does call again, could you tell him I'm shopping and that I'll try to call him later?"

"Of course," he answered. She could see the question in his eyes, though: But where were you last night? He had known exactly when she'd come in. Too late for a single woman in this small town.

"Thank you." she said, smiling. "I'd appreciate it."

Two minutes later she was in her car, driving to Noah's, anticipating the day, largely unconcerned about the phone calls. Yesterday she would have been, and she wondered what that meant.

As she was driving over the drawbridge less than four minutes after she'd left the inn, Lon called from the courthouse.

The Notebook

CHAPTER SIX: SWANS AND STORM

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 to the front and watched the car pull up and park beneath the oak tree again. Same spot as yesterday. Clem harked a greeting at her car door, tail wagging, and Noah saw Allie wave from inside the car.

She stepped out, patted Clem on the head, then turned, smiling. It was different today, though. Newer feelings now, not simply memories any more. If anything, his attraction for her had grown stronger overnight, and it made him feel a little nervous in her presence.

Allie met him halfway, carrying a small bag. She surprised him by kissing him gently on the cheek, her free hand lingering at his waist after she pulled back.

"Hi," she said, radiance in her eyes, "where's the surprise?" He relaxed a little, thanking God for that. "Not even a 'good afternoon' or 'how was your night?'"

She smiled. Patience had never been one of her strongest attributes.

"Fine. Good afternoon. How was your night? And where's the surprise?"

He chuckled lightly, then paused. "Allie, I've got some bad news. I was going to take you someplace, but with those clouds coming in I'm not sure we should go."

"Its not raining yet How far is it?"

"Up the creek about a mile."

"And I've never been there before?"

"Not when it was like this."

She thought for a second while she looked around. When she spoke, her voice was determined. "Then we'll go. I don't care if it rains."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

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 took it inside, placing 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?”

“I thought about it this morning. I remember it made me cry?’

“What you’re going to sec today makes what you saw then seem ordinary?

“I guess I should feel special.”

He took a few steps before responding. “You are special,” he finally said, and the way he said it made her wonder if he wanted to add something else. But he didn’t, and Allie smiled a little before glancing away. As she did, she felt the wind in her face and noticed it had picked up since the morning.

They reached the jetty and, after tossing the bag in the canoe, Noah quickly checked to make sure he hadn’t missed anything, then slid the canoe to the water.

Can I do anything?”

“No, just get in.”

After she climbed in, he pushed the canoe further into the water. Then he gracefully stepped off the jetty into the canoe, placing his feet carefully to prevent it from capsizing. Allie was impressed by his agility, knowing that what he had done so quickly and easily was harder than it looked.

She sat at the front of the canoe, facing backwards. Noah had said something about missing the view when he started to paddle, but she’d shaken her head, saying she was fine the way she was.

And it was true. She could see everything she really wanted to see if she turned her head, but most of all she wanted to watch Noah. It was him she’d come to see, not the creek. His shirt was unbuttoned at the top, and she could see his chest muscles flex with every stroke. His sleeves were rolled up too, and she could see the well-developed muscles in his arms.

Artistic, she thought. There’s something almost artistic about him. Something natural, as if being on the water were beyond his control, part of a gene passed on to him from some obscure hereditary pool.

She couldn't think of anyone else who remotely resembled him. He was complicated, almost contradictory in so many ways, yet simple, a strangely erotic combination. On the surface he was a country boy, home from war, and he probably saw himself in those terms. Yet there was so much more to him. Perhaps it was the poetry that made him different, or perhaps it was the values his father had instilled in him, growing up. Either way, he seemed to savour life more fully than others appeared to, and that was what had first attracted her to him.

"What arc you thinking?"

She felt her insides jump just a hit as Noah's voice brought her back to the present. She realized she hadn't said much since they'd started, and she appreciated the silence he had allowed her. He'd always been considerate like that.

"Good things," she answered quietly, and she saw in his eyes that he knew she was thinking about him. She liked the fact that he knew it, and she hoped he had been thinking about her as well.

She understood then that something was stirring within her, as it had so many years ago. Watching his body move made her feel it. And as their eyes met for a second, she felt the heat in her neck and breasts, and she flushed, turning away before he noticed.

"How much further?" she asked.

"Another half-mile or so. Not any more than that."

A pause. Then she said: "Tell me, Noah, what do you remember most from the summer we spent together?"

"All of it."

"Anything in particular?"

"No," he said.

"You don't remember?"

He answered quietly. "No, it's not that. It's not what you're thinking. I was serious when I said 'all of it.' I can remember every moment we were together, and in each of them there was something wonderful. I can't pick any one time that meant more than any other. The entire summer was perfect, the kind of summer everyone should have. How could I pick one moment over another?

"Poets often describe love as an emotion that we can't control, one that overwhelms logic and common sense. That's what it was like for me. I didn't plan on falling in love with you, and I doubt if you planned on falling in love with me. But once we met, it was clear that neither of us could control what was happening to us. We fell in love,

despite our differences, and once we did, something rare and beautiful was created. For me, love like that has happened only once, and that's why every minute we spent together has been seared in my memory. I'll never forget a single moment of it."

Allie stared at him. No one had ever said anything like that to her before. Ever. She didn't know what to say and stayed silent, her face hot.

"I'm sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable, Allie. I didn't mean to. But that summer has stayed with me and probably always will. I know it can't be the same between us, but that doesn't change the way I felt about you then."

"It didn't make me uncomfortable. Noah ... It's just that I don't ever hear things like that. What you said was beautiful. It takes a poet to talk the way you do. and like I said, you're the only poet I've ever met."

Peaceful silence descended on them. An osprey cried somewhere in the distance. The paddle moved rhythmically, causing ripples that rocked the boat ever so slightly. The breeze had stopped, and the clouds grew blacker as the canoe moved onwards.

Allie noticed it all, every sound, every thought. Her senses had come alive, invigorating her, and she felt strangely satisfied that she'd come, pleased that Noah had turned into the type of man she'd thought he would, pleased that she would live for ever with that knowledge. She had seen too many men in the past few years destroyed by war, or time, or even money. It took strength to hold on to inner passion, and Noah had done that.

This was a worker's world, not a poet's, and people would have a hard time understanding Noah. Who did she know in Raleigh who took time off to fix a house? Or read Whitman or Eliot? Or hunt at dawn from the bow of a canoe? These weren't the things that drove society, but she felt they made living worth while.

To her it was the same with art, though she had realized it only upon coming here. Or rather, remembered it. She had known it once before, and again she cursed herself for forgetting something as important as creating beauty. Painting was what she was meant to do, she was sure of that now. She was going to give it another shot, no matter what anyone 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 abstract, meant to inspire thought. Lon had

stared at it, and then had asked her what it was supposed to he,

She knew she wasn't being completely fair. She loved Lou, and always had, for other reasons. Lon was a good man, the kind of man she'd always known she would marry. With him there would be no surprises, and 'there was comfort in knowing what the future would bring. He would be a kind husband and she would be a good wife. She would have a home near friends and family, children, a respectable place in society. It was the kind of life she'd always expected to live. And though she wouldn't describe theirs as a passionate relationship, she had convinced herself long ago that this wasn't necessary for fulfilment. Passion would fade in time and things like companionship and compatibility would take its place. She and Lon had this, and she had assumed this was all she needed.

But now, as she watched Noah rowing, she questioned this assumption. He exuded sexuality in everything he did, everything he was, and she caught herself thinking about him in a way that an engaged woman shouldn't. She tried not to stare, but the easy way he moved his body made it hard to keep her eyes from him for long.

"Here we are," Noah said as he guided the canoe towards some trees near the bank.

Allie looked around, not seeing anything. "Where is it?"

"Here," he said again, pointing the canoe at a fallen tree that was almost completely obscuring an opening.

He guided the canoe around the tree, and both of them had to lower their heads to keep from bumping them.

"Close your eyes," he whispered, and Allie did, bringing her hands to her face. She felt the movement of the canoe as he propelled it forwards, away from the pull of the creek.

"Okay." he finally said after he'd stopped paddling. "You can open them now."

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 group of chicks, recently hatched, following a pack of

geese near the shore, struggling to keep up.

The air was filled with honking and chirping as Noah moved the canoe through the water. The birds ignored them for the most part. The only ones that seemed bothered were those forced to move when the canoe approached them. Allie reached out to touch the closest ones and felt their feathers ruffling under her fingers.

Noah took out the bread he'd brought in his bag and handed it to Allie. She scattered it, favouring the little ones, laughing and smiling as they swam in circles looking for food.

They stayed until thunder boomed in the distance—faint hut powerful—and both of them knew it was time to leave.

Noah paddled the canoe hack to the main creek. She was still amazed by what she had seen.

"Noah, what are they doing here?"

"I don't know. I know the swans from up north migrate to Lake Matamuskeet every winter, hut I guess they came here this time. I don't know why. Maybe the early blizzard had something to do with it. Maybe they got off track or something. They'll find their way back, though. They're driven by instinct, and this isn't their place. Some of the geese may winter here, hut the swans will go back to Matamuskeet."

Noah paddled hard as dark clouds rolled directly overhead. Soon rain began to fall, a light sprinkle at first, then gradually harder. Lightning . . . a pause . . . then thunder again. A little louder now. Maybe six or seven miles away. More rain as Noah began to paddle even harder, his muscles tightening with every stroke.

Thicker drops now, falling hard. Noah rowing... getting wet… cursing to himself ... losing to Mother Nature.

Allie watched the rain fall diagonally from the sky as it rode on westerly winds that whistled over the trees. The sky darkened a little more. She leaned her head back for a moment to let it hit her face. She ran her hands through her hair, feeling its wetness. It felt wonderful, she felt wonderful. Even through the rain she could hear him breathing hard, and the sound aroused her sexually in a way she hadn't felt in years.

A cloud burst directly above them and the rain began to come down harder than she'd ever seen it. Allie looked upwards and laughed, giving up any attempt at keeping dry, making Noah feel better. 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, tying it to the jetty.

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. 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. He quickly turned away, embarrassed. When he finished and stood, Allie took his hands in hers, surprising him. Despite the downpour, they didn't rush towards the house, and Noah imagined what it would be like to spend the night with her.

Allie felt the warmth in his hands and wondered what it would be like to have them touch her body, lingering slowly across her skin. Just thinking about it made her take a deep breath. She realized then that something had changed. And although she couldn't pinpoint the exact time—yesterday after dinner, or this afternoon in the canoe, or when they saw the swans, or maybe even now as they walked holding hands—she knew that she had fallen in love with Noah Taylor Calhoun again, and that maybe, just maybe, she had never stopped.

THERE WAS no uneasiness between them as they reached the door and went inside, pausing in the hall, clothes dripping.

'I think I can find something here for you so you can get out of those clothes. It might be a little big, but it's warm."

"Anything," she said.

"I'll be back in a second."

Noah slipped off his boots, then ran up the stairs, descending a minute later. He had a pair of cotton trousers and a long-sleeved shin under one arm and some jeans with a blue shirt in the other.

"Here,' he said, handing her the cotton trousers and shirt. "You can change in the bedroom upstairs. There's a bathroom and towel up there too if you want to shower."

She thanked him with a smile and went upstairs, feeling his eyes on her as she walked. She entered the bedroom and closed the door, then set the trousers and shirt on his bed and peeled everything off. Naked, she went to his closet and found a hanger, put her dress, bra and panties on it, and then went to hang it in the bathroom so it wouldn't drip on the hardwood floor. She felt a secret thrill at being naked in the same room he slept in.

She didn’t want to shower after being in the rain. She liked the soft feeling on her skin. She slipped on his clothes before looking at herself in the mirror. The trousers were big, but tucking in the shin helped, and she rolled up the bottoms just a little so they wouldn’t drag. The neck was torn a little, but she liked the way it looked on her anyway. She pulled the sleeves up almost to the elbows, went to the chest of drawers and slipped on some socks, then went to the bathroom to find a hairbrush.

She brushed her wet hair just enough to get out the tangles, letting it rest on her shoulders. Looking in the mirror, she wished she had brought a clasp or a couple of hairpins. And a little more mascara. Her eyes still had a little of what she’d put on earlier, and she touched up with a flannel, doing the best she could.

When she was finished, she checked herself in the mirror, feeling pretty despite everything, and went back downstairs.

Noah was in the living room squatting before a fire, doing his best to coax it to 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.

He poked the fire, moving the logs, and added some more kindling. Allie leaned against the doorjamb, 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 looked up quickly.

Even in his clothes she looked beautiful. After a moment he shyly went back to stacking the logs.

“I didn’t hear you come in.” he said, trying to sound casual. “How long have you been standing there?”

“A couple of minutes.”

Noah brushed his hands on his jeans, then pointed to the kitchen. “Can I get you some tea? I started the water while you were upstairs.” Small talk, anything to keep his mind clear. But damn, the way she looked...

She thought for a second. Do you have anything stronger, or is it too early to drink?”

He smiled. “I have some bourbon in the pantry. Is that okay?”

“That sounds great.”

He started towards the kitchen, and Allie watched him run his hand through his wet hair as he disappeared.

Thunder boomed loudly and another downpour started. Allie could hear the roaring of the rain on the roof, could hear the snapping of lop as the flickering flames lit the room. She took a quilt from the sofa and sat on the rug in front of the fire. Crossing her legs, she adjusted the quilt until she was comfortable and watched the dancing flames. Noah came back, saw what she 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 back the thought

"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 romantic to me."

She was quiet for a moment, and Noah watched the fire flicker in her emerald eyes. Then she said, "Do you remember sitting together and watching the storm a few nights before I left?"

"Of course."

"I used to think about it all the time after I went home. I always thought about how you looked that night. It was the way I remembered you."

"Have I changed much?"

She took another sip of bourbon, feeling it warm her. She touched his hand as she answered.

"Not really. Not in the things that I remember. You're older, of course, with more life behind you, but you've still got the same gleam in your eye. You still read poetry and float on rivers. And you've still got a gentleness that not even the war could take away."

He thought about what she'd said and felt her hand lingering on his, her thumb tracing slow circles.

"Allie, you asked me earlier what I remembered most about the summer. What do you remember?"

It was a while before she answered. "I remember making love. That's what I remember most. You were my first, and it was more wonderful than I ever thought it would be."

Noah took a drink of bourbon, remembering, bringing back the

old feelings.

She went on. “I remember being so afraid beforehand that I was trembling, but at the same time being so excited. I'm glad you were the first. I'm glad we were able to share that.”

“Me too.”

“Were you as afraid as I was?”

Noah nodded without speaking, and she smiled at his honesty.

She squeezed his hand, let go, and moved closer. She put her hand through his arm, cradling it, and rested her head on his shoulder. He could smell her, soft like the rain, warm. She spoke quietly. “Do you remember walking home after the festival? I asked you if you wanted to see me again. You just nodded your head and didn't say a word. It wasn’t too convincing.”

“I'd never met anyone like you. I didn't know what to say.”

“I know. You could never hide anything. Your eyes always gave you away. You had the most wonderful eyes I'd ever seen.” She lifted her head from his shoulder and looked directly at him. When she spoke, her voice was barely above a whisper. “I think I loved you more that summer than I ever loved anyone.”

Lightning flashed again. In the quiet moments before the thunder, their eyes met as they tried to undo fourteen years. When the thunder finally sounded, Noah sighed and turned from her, towards the windows.

“I wish you could have read the letters I wrote you,” he said.

She didn't speak for a while.

“It wasn't just up to you, Noah. I didn’t tell you, but I wrote you a dozen letters after I got home. I just never sent them.”

“Why?” Noah was surprised.

“I guess I was too afraid.”

“Of what?”

“That maybe it wasn’t as real as I thought it was. That maybe you forgot me.”

“I would never do that. I couldn't even think it.”

“I know that now. I can see it when I took at you. But back then it was different. There was so much I didn't understand, things that a young girl's mind couldn't sort out.”

"What do you mean?”

"When your letters never came, I didn't know what to think. I remember talking to my best friend about that summer, and she said that you had 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 ..."

Noah looked away and she continued. "In time, the hurt began to fade and it was easier to just let it go. At least I thought it was. But in every boy I met in the next few years I found myself looking for you, and when the feelings got too strong I'd write you another letter. But I never sent them for fear of what I might find. By then you'd gone on with your life and I didn't want to think about you loving-someone else. I wanted to remember us like we were that summer."

"You're better than I remembered, Allie."

"You're sweet, Noah."

He almost stopped there, knowing that if he kept the words inside him he could keep control, the same control he had kept the past fourteen years. But then something overtook him and he gave in to it, hoping 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 smouldering remains, almost burned through.

Allie took a sip of bourbon and began to feel its effects. But it wasn't Just the alcohol that made her hold Noah a little tighter and feet his warmth against her. Glancing out of the window, she saw the clouds were almost black. "Noah, you've never asked, but I want you to know something."

"What is it?"

Her voice was tender. "There's never been another, Noah. You weren't just the first. You're the only man-I've ever been with, I don't expect you to say the same thing, but I wanted you to know."

Noah was silent as he turned away. She felt warmer as she watched the fire. She leaned into him and felt the heat between them, felt his body, felt his arm tight around her. It felt so right to be here. Everything felt right. The fire, the drinks, the storm—it

couldn't have been more perfect. It seemed their years apart didn't matter any more.

They gave in then to everything they had fought against for 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 and kissed her tenderly, 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 downwards. 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 lightly, exploring his body. She kissed his neck gently as she pulled the shirt over his shoulders, freeing the sleeves. With that, he slowly reached for her. He lifted her shirt and ran his finger slowly across her belly before raising her arms and slipping it off. She felt short of breath as his hands gently caressed her back, her arms, her shoulders, and she felt their heated bodies press together, skin to skin.

They lay back, close to the fire, and the heat made the air seem thick. She ran her hands through his hair as he held himself above her, his arm muscles hard from the exertion. With a little tempting frown, she pulled him closer, but he resisted. Instead he lowered himself and lightly rubbed his chest against her, and she felt her body respond with anticipation.

He did this until she couldn't take it any more, and when they finally joined as one, she cried aloud and pressed her fingers hard into his back. She buried her face in his neck and felt him deep inside her, felt his strength and gentleness.

She opened her eyes and watched him in the firelight, marvelling at his beauty. She saw his body glisten with crystal sweat and felt every responsibility, every facet of her life, slipping away.

By the time the rain had stopped and the sun had set, her body was exhausted. They spent the day in each other's arms, alternately making love by the fire and then holding each other as they watched the flames curl around the wood. He recited his favourite poems as she lay beside him, and she listened with her eyes closed and almost felt the words. Then they joined again and he murmured words of

love between kisses as they wrapped their arms around one another.

They went on throughout the evening, making up for their years apart, and slept in each other's arms that night. Occasionally he would wake up and look at her, her body spent and radiant, and feel as if everything were suddenly tight in this world.

Once, when he was looking at her in the moments before daybreak, her eyes fluttered open and she smiled and reached up to touch his face. He put his fingers to her lips, gently, to keep her from speaking, and for a long time they just looked at one another.

When the lump in his throat subsided, he whispered to her, “You are the answer to every prayer I’ve offered. You are a song, a dream, a whisper, and I don't know how I could have lived without you 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.

The Notebook

CHAPTER SEVEN: AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR

LATER THAT same morning, three men - two lawyers and the judge—sat in chambers while Lon finished speaking.

“It’s an unusual request,” the judge answered, pondering the situation. “It seems to me the trial could very well end today. Are you saying this matter can't wait until later this evening or tomorrow?”

“No, your honour, it cant,” Lon answered almost too quickly. Stay relaxed, he told himself. Take a deep breath.

“And it has nothing to do with this case?”

“No, your honour. It's of a personal nature. I know it's out of the ordinary, but I really need to take care of it.”

The judge leaned back in his chair, evaluating him for a moment. “Mr. Bates, how do you feel about this?”

The lawyer cleared his throat. “Mr. Hammond called me this morning arid I've already spoken to my clients. They're willing to postpone until Monday. Mr. Hammond has agreed in return to reopen discussion on a certain matter not covered by this proceeding.”

The judge looked hard at both of them. “I don't like it,” he said, “not at all. But Mr. Hammond has never made such a request before, and I assume the matter is very important to him.” He banged for effect, then looked at some papers on his desk. “I'll agree to adjourn until Monday; Nine o'clock sharp.”

"Thank you, your honour.” 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,

NOAH MADE breakfast for Allie while she slept in the living room. Bacon, rolls and coffee, nothing spectacular. He set the tray beside her as she woke up, and as soon as they had finished eating they made love again, in powerful confirmation of what they had shared the day before.

They showered and afterwards Allie put on her dress, which had dried overnight She spent the morning with Noah, Together they fed Clem and checked the windows to make sure no damage bad been done in the storm. Two pine trees bad blown over, though neither had caused much damage, and a few shingles had Mown off the shed, but,

other than that, the property had escaped unscathed.

He held her hand most of the morning and they talked easily, but sometimes he would stop speaking and just stare at her. When he did, she felt as though she should say something, but nothing meaningful ever came into her head. She usually just kissed him.

A little before noon, Noah and Allie went in to prepare lunch. Using what he had on hand, they tried some chicken and baked another batch of bread rolls, and the two of them ate on the porch, serenaded by a mockingbird.

While they were inside doing the dishes* they heard a knock at the door, Noah left Allie in the kitchen.

Knock, knock. Louder.

Noah approached the door.

Knock, knock.

“I'm coming,” he said as he opened the door. “Oh, my God.”

He stared for a moment at a beautiful woman in her early fifties, a woman he would have recognized anywhere.

“Hello, Noah,” she said.

Noah said nothing.

“May I come in?" she asked, her voice steady, revealing nothing.

He stammered out a reply as she walked past him, stopping just before the stairs.

“Who is it?” Allie shouted from the kitchen, and the woman turned at the sound of her voice.

"It's your mother.” Noah finally answered, and immediately after he said it he heard the sound of breaking glass.

“I knew you would be here,” Anne Nelson said to her daughter as the three of them sat around the coffee table in the living room.

“How could you be so sure?”

“You're my daughter. One day when you have kids of your own, you'll know the answer.” She smiled, but her manner was stiff, and Noah imagined how difficult this must be for her. “I saw the article, too, and I saw your reaction. I also saw how tense you've been during the last couple of weeks, and when you said you were going shopping near the coast, I knew exactly what you meant.”

“What about daddy?”

Anne Nelson shook her head, “No, I didn't tell your father or anyone else about it. Nor did I tell anyone where I was going today.”

“Why did you come?” Allie asked.

“I came because I had to,” her mother said, “which I'm sure is

the same reason you came. Am I right?”

Allie nodded.

Anne turned to Noah. “I know you don't think so, but I always liked you. I just didn't think you were right for my daughter. Can you understand that?”

He shook his head as he answered. “No, not really. It wasn’t fair to me, and it wasn't fair to Allie. Otherwise she wouldn't be here.”

She watched him as he answered, but she said nothing. Allie, sensing an argument, cut in. “What do you mean when you say you had to come? Don't you trust me?”

Anne turned back to her daughter. “This has nothing to do with trust. This has to do with Lon. He called the house last night to talk to me about Noah, and he's on his way here right now. He seemed very upset. I thought you'd want to know.”

Allie inhaled sharply. “He's on his way?”

“As we speak. He arranged to have the trial postponed until next week. If he's not in New Bern yet, he's close.”

“What did you say to him?”

"Not much. But he knew. He had it all figured out. He remembered my telling him about Noah a long time ago.”

Allie swallowed hard, “Did you tell him I was here?”

“No. And I won't. That's between you and him. But knowing him, I'm sure he'll find you. All it takes is a couple of phone calls to the right people. After all, I was able to find you,”

Allie, though obviously wearied, smiled at her mother. “Thank you,” she said, and her mother readied for her hand.

“I know we've had our differences, Allie, and that we haven't seen eye to eye on everything. But I'm-your mother and that means I’ll always love you.”

Allie was silent for a moment, then: “What should I do?”

"I don’t know, Allie, That's up to you. But I would think about it. Think about what you really want.”

Allie turned away, her eyes reddening. A moment later a tear drifted down her cheek. “I don't know . . . ” She trailed off, and her mother squeezed her hand.

Anne looked at Noah, who had been sitting with his head down, listening carefully. As if on cue, he returned her gaze, nodded and left the room.

When he was gone, Anne whispered, “Do you love him?”

“Yes, I do,” Allie answered softly, “very much.”

“Do you love Lon?”

“Yes, I do. I love him, too. Dearly, but in a different way. He doesn't make me feel the way Noah does.”

“No one will ever do that,” her mother said, and she released Allie's hand. “I can't make this decision for you, Allie, this one's all yours. I want you to know, though, that I love you. And I always will. I know that doesn't help, but it's all I can do.”

She reached in her handbag and removed a bundle of letters held together with string, the envelopes old and slightly yellowed.

"These are the letters that Noah wrote to you. I never threw them away, and they haven't been opened. I know I shouldn't have kept them from you, and I'm sorry for that. But I was just trying to protect you. I didn't realize...”

Allie took them and ran her hand over them, shocked.

"I should go, Allie. You've got some decisions to make, and you don't have much time. Do you want me to stay in town?”

Allie shook her head, “No, this is up to me.”

Anne nodded and watched her daughter for a moment, wondering. Finally she stood, went around the table, leaned over and kissed Allie on the cheek. She could see the confusion in her daughter's eyes as Allie embraced her.

They stood together for another minute, just holding each other.

“Thanks for coming, Allie said, “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

As her mother made her way out of the living room, Allie thought that she heard her whisper, "Follow your heart,” but she couldn’t be sure,

NOAH OPENED the door for Anne Nelson as she went out.

“Goodbye Noah," she said quietly. He nodded without speaking. There wasn't anything else to say; they both knew that. She turned from him and left, closing the door behind her. Noah watched her dim away without looking back. She was a strong woman, he thought to himself, and he knew then where Allie got it

Noah peeped into the living room, saw Allie sitting with her head down, then went to the back porch, knowing that she needed to be alone. He sat quietly in his rocker and watched the water

After what seemed like an eternity he heard the back door open. He didn’t turn to look at her—for some reason he couldn’t-and he listened as she sat in the chair beside him.

“I’m sorry,“ Allie said. ”I bad no idea this would happen."

Noah shook his head. “Don't be sorry. We both knew it was coming to some form or another.”

"It’s still hard.”

“I know.” He finally turned to her, reaching for her hand. “Is here anything I can do to make it easier?”

She shook her head. “No. Not really. I have to do this alone. Besides, I'm not sure what I'm going to say to him yet.” She looked down and her voice became softer. “I guess it depends on him and low much he knows. If my mother was right, he may have suspicions, but he doesn't know anything for sure.”

Noah felt tightness in his stomach. When he finally spoke his voice was steady, but she could hear the pain in it. “You're not going to tell him about us, are you?”

“I don't know. I really don't. While I was in the living room, I kept asking myself what I really wanted in my life.” She squeezed his hand. “And do you know what the answer was? The answer was that I want you. I want us. I love you and I always have.” She took a deep breath before going on. “But I also want a happy ending without hurting anyone. And I know that if I stayed, people would be hurt. Especially Lon. I wasn't lying when I told you that I love him. He doesn't make me feel the same way you do, but I care for him, and this wouldn't be fair to him. But staying here would also hurt my family and friends. I would be betraying everyone I know ... I don't know if I can do that.”

“You can't live your life for other people. You've got to do what's right for you, even if it hurts some people you love.”

“I know,” she said, “but no matter what I choose I have to live with it. For ever. I have to be able to go forward and not look back any more. Can you understand that?”

He shook his head and tried to keep his voice steady. “Not really. Not if it means losing you. I can't do that again.”

She didn't say anything but lowered her head. Noah went on: “Could you really leave me without looking back?”

She bit her lip as she answered. Her voice was beginning to crack. “I don't know. Probably not.”

“Would that be fair to Lon?”

She didn't answer. Instead she stood up, wiped her face and walked to the edge of the porch where she leaned against the post and watched the water before answering quietly: “No.”

“It doesn't have to be like this, Allie,” he said. “We're adults

now, we have the choice we didn't have before. We're meant to be together. We always have been." He walked to her side and put his hand on her shoulder. "I don't want to live the rest of my life thinking about you and dreaming of what might have been. Stay with me, Allie."

Tears filled her eyes. "I don't know if I can," she whispered.

"You can. Allie ... I can't live my life happily knowing you're with someone else. That would kill a part of me. What we have is rare. It's too beautiful to just throw it away."

After a moment he gently turned her towards him, took her hands and stared at her, willing her to look at him. Allie finally faced him with moist eyes. After a long silence, Noah brushed the tears from her cheeks with his fingers. His voice caught as he saw what her eyes were telling him. "You're not going to stay, are you?" He smiled weakly. "You want to, but you can't."

"Oh, Noah," she said as the tears began again, "try to understand __"

He shook his head to stop her. "I know what you're trying to say —I can see it in your eyes. But I don't want to understand it, Allie. I don't want it to end this way. I don't want it to end at all. But if you leave, we both know we'll never see each other again."

She leaned into him and began to cry harder as Noah fought back his own tears. He wrapped his arms around her.

"Allie, I can't force you to stay with me. But no matter what happens in my life, I'll never forget these last couple of days with you. I've been dreaming about this for years."

He kissed her gently, and they embraced as they had when she first got out of her car two days ago. Finally Allie let him go and wiped her tears. "I have to get my things, Noah."

He didn't go inside with her. Instead he sat down in the rocker, spent. He watched her go into the house and listened as the sound of her movements faded into nothing. She emerged minutes later with everything she'd brought and walked towards him with her head down. She handed him the drawing she had done yesterday morning. "Here, Noah. I made this for you."

Noah took the drawing and unrolled it slowly.

The image in the foreground, which occupied most of the page, was a picture of how he looked now. Noah noticed that she had pencilled in every detail of his face. It was almost as if she'd copied it from a recent photograph. The second image was the front of the

house. The detail there was also incredible, as if she had sketched it while sitting beneath the oak tree.

“It's beautiful, Allie. Thank you.” He attempted a smile. “I told you that you were an artist.” She nodded, her face cast downwards, her lips pressed together. It was time for her to go.

They walked to her car slowly, without speaking. When they reached it, Noah embraced her again until he could feel the tears welling up in his own eyes. He kissed her lips and both cheeks, then with his finger softly brushed the places he'd kissed.

“I love you, Allie.”

“I love you, too.”

Noah opened her car door and they kissed one more time. Then she slid behind the wheel, never taking her eyes from him. She put the packet of letters and her handbag next to her on the seat and fumbled for the keys, then turned the ignition. It started easily and the engine began to turn over impatiently. It was almost time.

Noah pushed her door closed with both hands and Allie rolled down the window. She reached out her hand and Noah took it for just a moment, moving his fingers softly against her skin.

“Stay with me,” Noah mouthed without sound, and this for some reason hurt more than Allie would have expected. The tears began to fall hard now, but she couldn't speak. Reluctantly, she looked away and pulled her hand from his. She put the car in gear.

He fell into an almost trancelike state as he watched it roll slowly forwards, the gravel crunching under the wheels. Slowly the car turned towards the road that would take her back to town. Noah felt dizzy at the sight. “Don't go!” he wanted to shout. But he didn't say anything, and a minute later the only remaining signs of her were the tracks that her car had left behind.

She was gone. For ever this time. For ever. He closed his eyes.

DRIVING WITH TEARS in her eyes was difficult, but Allie went on anyway. She kept the window rolled down, thinking the fresh air might help clear her mind, but it didn't seem to. Nothing would help. She was tired, and she wondered if she would have the energy she needed to talk to Lon. And what was she going to say? She hoped that something would come to her when the time came. By the time she reached Front Street, she had herself a little more under control. Traffic was light and she had time to watch strangers going about their business as she drove through New Bern. At a service station, a mechanic was looking under the bonnet of a new car. Two women

were pushing prams just outside Hoffman-Lane, chatting while they window-shopped.

She saw the inn just up the street while she was stopped at a red light. She took a deep breath when the light turned green and drove slowly until she reached the parking lot. She turned in and saw Lon's car sitting in the first spot. Although the one next to it was open, she passed it and picked a spot a little further from the entrance.

She turned off the engine, then reached into the glove compartment for a mirror and brush. Looking at herself, she saw her eyes were still red and puffy. Like yesterday after the rain, she was sorry she didn't have any make-up, though she doubted it would help much now. She reached for her purse, opened it, and once again looked at the article that had brought her here. It felt impossible to her that she had arrived only the day before yesterday. It seemed like a lifetime since her dinner with Noah.

Starlings chirped in the trees around her. The clouds had begun to break up now, and Allie could see blue in between patches of white. It was going to be a beautiful day.

It was the kind of day she would have liked to spend with Noah, and as she was thinking about him, she remembered the letters her mother had given her and reached for them. She untied the package and found the first letter he had written her. She began to open it, then stopped because she could imagine what was in it. Something simple, no doubt—things he'd done, memories of the summer, perhaps some questions. Instead she reached for the last letter, the one on the bottom of the stack. The goodbye letter. This one interested her far more. How had he said it? How would she have said it?

The envelope was thin. One, maybe two pages. Whatever he had written wasn't too long. She turned it over and checked the back. No name, just a street address in New Jersey. She held her breath as she used her fingernail to prise it open.

Unfolding it, she saw it was dated March 1935. Two and a half years without a reply.

She straightened the page and began to read.

My dearest Allie,

I don't know what to say any more except that I couldn't sleep last night because I knew that it is over between us. It is a different feeling for me, one that I never expected. Looking back, I suppose it couldn't have ended another way.

You and I were different. We came from different worlds, and

yet you were the one who taught me the value of love. You showed me what it was like to care for another, and I am a better man because of it. I don't want you ever to forget that.

I am not bitter because of what has happened. On the contrary I am secure in knowing that what we had was real, and I am happy we were able to come together for even a short 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 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 savour the memories we will always share.

I love you, Allie.

Noah

She read the letter again, then put it back into the envelope. She knew she couldn't delay any longer. Lon was waiting for her.

Her legs felt weak as she stepped out of the car. She paused and took a deep breath, and as she started across the parking lot she realized that she still wasn't sure what she was going to say to him.

And the answer didn't finally come until she reached the door and opened it and saw Lon standing in the lobby.

The Notebook

CHAPTER EIGHT: WINTER FOR TWO

THE STORY ends there, so I close the notebook, remove my glasses and wipe my eyes. I look at her now that I have finished, but she does not look back. Instead she is staring out of the window at the courtyard, where friends and family meet.

I read to her this morning, as I do every morning, because it is something I must do. Not for duty—although I suppose a case could be made for this—but for another, more romantic reason. I wish I could explain it more fully right now, but it's still early, and talking about romance isn't really possible before lunch any more, at least not for me. Besides, I have no idea how it's going to turn out, and to be honest; I'd rather not get my hopes up.

We spend every day together now, but our nights are spent alone. The doctors tell me that I'm not allowed to see her after dark. I understand the reasons, and though I agree with them completely I sometimes break the rules. Late at night when my mood is right, I will sneak from my room and go to hers and watch her while she sleeps. Of this she knows nothing. I'll come in and see her breathe and know that, had it not been for her, I would never have married.

And when I look at her face, a face I know better than my own, I know that I have meant as much to her. And that means more to me than I could ever hope to explain.

Sometimes, when I am standing there, I think about how lucky I am to have been married to her for almost forty-nine years. Next month it will be that long. She heard me snore for the first forty-five, but since then we have slept in separate rooms. I do not sleep well without her. I toss and turn and yearn for her warmth and lie there most of the night, eyes open wide, watching the shadows dance across the ceilings like tumbleweeds rolling across the desert. I sleep two hours if I am lucky, and still I wake before dawn.

I shuffle towards her and sit in the chair beside her bed. My back aches when I sit. I must get a new cushion for this chair, I remind myself for the hundredth time. I reach for her hand and take it, bony and fragile. It feels nice. She responds with a twitch, and gradually her thumb begins to rub my finger softly. I do not speak until she does; this I have learned. Most days I sit in silence until the sun goes down.

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 like a whisper.

“Yes,” I answer.

She turns towards the nightstand. Her medicine is in a little cup. Mine too. Little pills, colours like a rainbow so we won't forget to take them. They bring mine here to her room now, even though they're not supposed to.

“I've heard it before, haven't I?”

“Yes,” I say again, just as I do every time. I have learned to be patient.

She studies my face. Her eyes are as green as ocean waves.

“It makes me feel less afraid,” she says.

“I know.” I nod, rocking my head softly.

She turns away, and I wait some more. She releases my hand and reaches for her water glass. She takes a sip.

“Is it a true story?” She sits up a little in her bed and takes another drink. Her body is still strong. “I mean, did you know these people?”

“Yes,” I say again. I could say more, but usually I don't. She is still beautiful.

She asks the obvious. “Well, which one did she finally marry?”

I answer, “The one who was right for her.”

“Which one was that?”

I smile. “You'll know,” I say quietly, “by the end of the day. You'll know.”

She does not question me further. Instead she begins to fidget. She is thinking of a way to ask me another question, though she isn't sure how to do it.

A bird starts to sing outside the window and we both turn our heads. We sit quietly for a while, enjoying something beautiful together. Then it is lost, and she sighs. “I have to ask you something else,” she says.

“Whatever it is, I'll try to answer.”

“It's hard, though.”

She does not look at me and I cannot see her eyes. This is how she hides her thoughts. Some things never change.

“Take your time,” I say. I know what she will ask.

Finally she turns to me and looks into my eyes. She offers a gentle smile, the kind you share with a child, not a lover.

“I don't want to hurt your feelings because you've been so nice to me, but...”

I wait. Her words will hurt me. They will tear a piece from my heart and leave a scar.

“Who are you?”

WE HAVE LIVED at Creekside Extended Care Facility for three years now. It was her decision to come here, partly because it was near our home, but also because she thought it would be easier for me. We boarded up our home because neither of us could bear to sell it, signed some papers, and received a place to live and die in exchange for some of the freedom for which we had worked a lifetime.

She was right to do this, of course. There is no way I could have made it alone, for sickness has come to us, both of us. We are in the final minutes in the day of our lives, and the clock is ticking. Loudly. I wonder if I am the only one who can hear it.

A throbbing pain courses through my fingers, and it reminds me that we have 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 through most of my waking hours. But 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 a hundred and twenty, I don't want to, and I don't think my body would make it even if I did. It is falling apart, steady erosion on the inside and at the joints. My kidneys are beginning to fail and my heart rate is decreasing every month. Worse, I have cancer again, this time of the prostate. This is my third bout with the unseen enemy, and it will take me eventually, though not till I say it is time. The doctors are worried about me, but I am not. I have no time for worry in this twilight of my life.

Of our five children, four are still living, and though it is hard for them to visit, they come often, and for this I am thankful. But even

when they aren't here, they come alive in my mind every day, each of them, and they bring to mind the smiles and tears that come with raising a family. A dozen pictures line the walls of my room. They are my heritage, my contribution to the world. I am very proud. Sometimes I wonder what my wife thinks of them as she dreams, or if she thinks of them at all, or if she even dreams. There is so much about her I don't understand any more.

“My name,” I say, “is Duke.” I have always been a John Wayne fan.

“Duke,” she whispers to herself, “Duke.” She thinks for a moment, her forehead wrinkled, her eyes serious.

“Yes,” I say, “I'm here for you.” And always will be, I think to myself.

She flushes with my answer. Her eyes become wet and red, and tears begin to fall. My heart aches for her, and I wish for the thousandth time that there was something I could do.

She says, “I'm sorry. I don't understand anything that's happening to me right now. Even you. When I listen to you talk I feel like I should know you, but I don't. I don't even know my name.” She wipes at her tears and says, “Help me, Duke, help me remember who I am. Or at least, who I was. I feel so lost.”

I answer from my heart, but I lie to her about her name. As I have about my own. There is a reason for this.

“You are Hannah, a lover of life, a strength to those who shared in your friendships. You are a dream, a creator of happiness, an artist who has touched a thousand souls. You've led a full life and wanted for nothing, because your needs are spiritual and you have only to look inside you. You are kind and loyal, and you are able to see beauty where others do not. You are a teacher of wonderful lessons, a dreamer of better things.”

She does not respond. Instead she stares at me for a long while, until our breathing coincides. In. Out. In. Out. In. Out. Deep breaths. I wonder if she knows I think she's beautiful.

“Would you stay with me a while?” she finally asks.

I smile and nod. She smiles back. She reaches for my hand, takes it gently and pulls it to her waist. She stares at the hardened knots that deform my fingers and caresses them gently. Her hands are still those of an angel.

“Come,” I say as I stand with great effort, “let's go for a walk. The air is crisp and the goslings are waiting. It's beautiful today.” I

am staring at her as I say these last few words. She blushes. It makes me feel young again.

SHE WAS FAMOUS, of course. One of the best southern painters of the twentieth century, some said, and I was, and am, proud of her. Unlike me, who struggled to write even the simplest of verses, my wife could create beauty as easily as the Lord created the earth. Her paintings are in museums around the world, but I have kept only two for myself. The first one she ever gave me and the last one. They hang in my room, and late at night I sit and stare and sometimes cry when I look at them. I don't know why.

And so the years passed. We led our lives, working, painting, raising children, loving each other. I see photos of Christmases, family trips, of graduations and of weddings. I see grandchildren and happy faces. I see photos of us, our hair growing whiter, the lines in our faces deeper. A lifetime that seems so typical, yet uncommon.

We could not foresee the future, but then who can? I do not live now as I expected to. But I am not bitter. Our lives can't be measured by our final years, of this I am sure, and I guess I should have known what lay ahead. Looking back, I suppose it seems obvious, but at first I thought her confusion understandable and not unique. She would forget where she placed her keys, but who has not done that? She would forget a neighbour's name, but not someone we knew well or with whom we socialized. Sometimes she would write the wrong year when she made out her cheques, but again I dismissed it as simple mistakes that one makes when thinking of other things.

It was not until the more obvious events occurred that I began to suspect the worst. An iron in the freezer, clothes in the dishwasher, books in the oven. Other things, too. But the day I found her in the car three blocks away, crying over the steering wheel because she couldn't find her way home, was the first day I was really frightened. And she was frightened, too, for when I tapped on her window, she turned to me and said, “Oh God, what's happening to me? Please help me.” A knot twisted in my stomach, but I dared not think the worst.

Six days later the doctor saw her and began a series of tests. I did not understand them then and I do not understand them now, but I suppose it is because I am afraid to know. She spent almost an hour with Dr. Barnwell, and she went back the next day. That day was the longest day I have ever spent.

Finally he called us both into his office and sat us down. She held my arm confidently, but I remember clearly that my own hands

were shaking.

“I'm so sorry to have to tell you this,” Dr. Barnwell began, "but you seem to be in the early stages of Alzheimer’s...”

The words echoed in my head: the early stages of Alzheimer’s…

My world spun in circles, and I felt her grip tighten on my arm. She whispered, almost to herself: "Oh, Noah . . . Noah . . .”

And tears started to fall. It is a barren disease, as empty and lifeless as a desert. It is a thief of hearts and souls and memories. I did not know what to say to her as she sobbed on my bosom, so I simply held her and rocked her back and forth.

The doctor was grim. He was a good man, and this was hard for him. He was younger than my youngest, and I felt my age in his presence.

We rocked to and fro, and Allie, my dream, my timeless beauty, told me she was sorry. I knew there was nothing to forgive, and I whispered in her ear. “Everything will be fine,” I whispered, but inside I was afraid. I was a hollow man with nothing to offer.

I remember only bits and pieces of Dr. Barnwell's continuing explanation.

“It's a degenerative brain disorder affecting memory and personality. . . there is no cure or therapy . . . there's no way to tell how fast it will progress ... it differs from person to person. ... I wish I knew more. . . . Some days will be better than others. ... It will grow worse with the passage of time. . . . I'm sorry . . .”

Everyone was sorry. Our children were brokenhearted, our friends were scared for themselves. I don't remember leaving the doctor's office, and I don't remember driving home. My memories of that day are gone, and in this my wife and I are the same.

It has been four years now. Since then we have made the best of it, if that is possible. Allie organized, as was her disposition. She made arrangements to leave the house and move here. She rewrote her will and sealed it. She left specific burial instructions, and they sit in my desk, in the bottom drawer. I have not seen them. And when she was finished, she began to write. Letters to friends and children. Letters to brothers and sisters and cousins. Letters to nieces, nephews and neighbours. And a letter to me.

I read it sometimes when I am in the mood and, when I do, I am reminded of Allie on cold winter evenings, seated by a roaring fire with a glass of wine at her side, reading the letters I had written to her over the years. She kept them, these letters, and now I keep them, for

she made me promise to do so. She said I would know what to do with them. She was right; I find I enjoy reading bits and pieces of them just as she used to. They intrigue me, for when I sift through them I realize that romance and passion are possible at any age. I see Allie now and know I've never loved her more, but as I read the letters, I come to understand that I have always felt the same way.

I read them last three evenings ago, long after I should have been asleep. It was almost two o'clock when I went to the desk and found the stack of letters, thick and weathered. I untied the ribbon, itself almost half a century old, and found the letters her mother had hidden so long ago and those from afterwards. A lifetime of letters, letters professing my love, letters from my heart. I glanced through them with a smile on my face, picking and choosing, and finally opened a letter from our first anniversary.

I read an excerpt:

When I see you now—moving slowly with new life growing inside you—I hope you know how much you mean to me, and how special this year has been. No man is more blessed than me, and I love you with all my heart.

I put it aside and found another, this one from a cold evening thirty-nine years ago:

Sitting next to you, while our youngest daughter sang off-key in the school Christmas show, I looked at you and saw a pride that comes only to those who feel deeply in their hearts, and I knew that no man could be luckier than me.

And after our son died, the one who resembled his mother . . . It was the hardest time we ever went through, and the words still ring true today:

In times of grief and sorrow I will hold you and rock you, and take your grief and make it my own. When you cry, I cry, and when you hurt, I hurt. And together we will try to hold back the floods of tears and despair and make it through.

I pause for just a moment, remembering him. He was four years old at the time, just a baby. I have lived twenty times as long as he, but if asked, I would have traded my life for his. It is a terrible thing to outlive your child, a tragedy I wish upon no one.

They went on, this correspondence of life and love, and I read dozens more, some painful, most heart-warming. By three o'clock I was tired, but I had reached the bottom of the stack. There was one letter remaining, the last one I wrote to her, and by then I knew I had

to keep 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 am not a poet, and yet a poem is needed to fully express the way I feel about you.

So my mind drifts and I remember thinking about our life together as I made coffee this morning. Kate was there, and so was Jane, and they both became quiet when I walked into the kitchen. I saw they'd been crying, and without a word I sat myself beside them at the table and held, their hands. And when I looked at them, I saw you from so long-ago, the day we said goodbye. They resemble you and how you were then, beautiful and sensitive and wounded with the hurt that comes when something special is taken away. And for a reason I'm not sure I understand, I was inspired to tell them a story.

I called Jeff and David into the kitchen, for they were here as well, and when the children were ready I told them about us and how you came back to me so long ago. I told them about our walk, and the crab dinner in the kitchen, and they listened with smiles when they heard about the canoe ride, and sitting in front of the fire with the storm raging outside. I told them about your mother warning us about Lon the next day—they seemed as surprised as we were—and yes, I even told them what happened later that day, after you went back to town.

That part of the story has never left me, even after all this time. Even though you described it to me only once, I remember marvelling at the strength you showed that day. I still cannot imagine what was going through your mind when you walked into the lobby and saw Lon, or how it must have felt to talk to him. You told me that the two of you left the inn and sat on a bench by the old Methodist church, and that he held your hand, even as you explained that you must stay.

I know you cared for him. And his reaction proves to me he cared for you as well. Even as you explained that you had always loved me, and that it wouldn't be fair to him, he did not release your hand. I know he was hurt and angry, and tried for almost an hour to change your mind, but when you stood firm and said, “I can't go back

with you, I'm so sorry," he knew that your decision had been made. You said he simply nodded and the two of you sat together for a long time without speaking. I have always wondered what he was thinking as he sat with you, but I'm sure it was the same way I felt only a few hours before. And when he finally walked you to your car, you said he told you that I was a lucky man. He behaved as a gentleman would, and I understood then why your choice was so hard.

I remember that when I finished the story, the room was quiet until Kate finally stood to embrace me. "Oh, Daddy," she said with tears in her eyes, and though I expected to answer their questions, they did not ask any. Instead, they gave me something much more special. For the next four hours, each of them told me how much the two of us had meant to them growing up. One by one, they told stories about things I had long since forgotten. And by the end I was crying, because I realized how well we had done with raising them. I was so proud of them, and proud of you, and happy about the life we have led. And nothing will ever take that away. Nothing. I only wish you could have been here to enjoy it with me.

After they left, I rocked in silence, thinking back on our life together. You are always here with me when I do so, at least in my heart, and it is impossible for me to remember a time when you were not a part of me. I do not know who I would have become had you never come back to me that day.

I love you, Allie. I am who I am because of you. You are every reason, every hope and every dream I've ever had, and no matter what happens to us in the future, every day we are together is the greatest day of my life. I will always be yours.

And, my darling, you will always be mine.

Noah

I put the pages aside and remember sitting with Allie on our porch when she read this letter for the first time. It was late afternoon and the last remnants of the day were fading. The sky was slowly changing colour, and as I watched the sun go down I remember thinking about that brief, flickering moment when day suddenly turns into night. Dusk, I realized, is just an illusion, because the sun is either above the horizon or below it. And that means that day and night are linked in a way that few things are; there cannot be one without the other, yet they cannot exist at the same time. How would it feel, I remember wondering, to be always together, yet forever apart? I know the answer now. I know what it's like to be day and

night now; always together, forever apart.

THERE IS BEAUTY where we sit this afternoon, Allie and I. This is the pinnacle of my life. The birds, the geese, float on the cool water, which reflects bits and pieces of their colours and makes them seem larger than they really are. Allie too is taken in by their wonder, and little by little we get to know each other again.

“It's good to talk to you. I find that I miss it, even when it hasn't been that long.” I am sincere and she knows this, but she is still wary. I am a stranger.

“Is this something we do often?” she asks. “Do we sit here and watch the birds a lot? I mean, do we know each other well?”

“Yes and no. I think everyone has secrets, but we have been acquainted for years.”

She looks to her hands, then mine. She thinks about this for a moment, her face at such an angle that she looks young again. We do not wear our rings. Again, there is a reason for this. She asks: “Were you ever married?”

I nod. “Yes.”

“What was she like?”

I tell the truth. “She was my dream. She made me who I am, and holding her in my arms was more natural to me than my own heartbeat. I think about her all the time. Even now, when I'm sitting here, I think about her. There could never have been another.”

She takes this in. I don't know how she feels about this. Finally she speaks softly, her voice angelic, sensual. I wonder if she knows I think these things. “Is she dead?”

“My wife is alive in my heart. And she always will be,” I answer.

“You still love her, don't you?”

“Of course. But I love many things. I love to sit here with you. I love to watch the osprey swoop towards the creek and find its dinner. I love to share the beauty of this place with someone I care about.”

She is quiet for a moment. She looks away so I can't see her face. It has been her habit for years. “Why are you doing this?” No fear, just curiosity. This is good. I know what she means, but I ask anyway.

“What?”

“Why are you spending the day with me?”

I smile. “I'm here because this is where I'm supposed to be. It's not complicated. Both you and I are enjoying ourselves. Don't dismiss

my time with you—it's not wasted. It's what I want. I sit here and we talk and I think to myself, “What could be better than what I am doing now?”

She looks me in the eyes, and for a moment, just a moment, her eyes twinkle. A slight smile forms on her lips. “I like being with you, but if getting me intrigued is what you're after you've succeeded. I admit I enjoy your company, but I know nothing about you. I don't expect you to tell me your life story, but why are you so mysterious?”

“I read once that women love mysterious strangers.”

“See, you haven't really answered the question. You haven't answered most of my questions. You didn't even tell me how the story ended this morning.”

I shrug. We sit quietly for a while. Finally I ask: “Is it true that women love mysterious strangers?”

She thinks about this and laughs. Then she answers as I would: “I think some women do.”

“Do you?”

“Now don't go putting me on the spot. I don't know you well enough for that.” She is teasing me and I enjoy it.

We sit and watch the world around us. This has taken us a lifetime to learn. It seems only the old are able to sit next to one another and not say anything and still feel content. The young, brash and impatient, must always break the silence. It is a waste, for silence is pure. Silence is holy. It draws people together because only those who are comfortable with each other can sit without speaking. This is the great paradox.

Time passes, and gradually our breathing begins to coincide. Deep breaths, relaxed breaths, and there is a moment when she dozes off, like those comfortable with one another often do. When she wakes, a miracle: “Do you see that bird?” She points to it, and I strain my eyes. It is a wonder I can see it, but I can because the sun is bright.

“Caspian stern,” I say softly, and we devote our attention to it 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, to limit the pain. There are days she never learns of her children or that we are married. I am sorry for this, but I will not change.

Does this make me dishonest? Perhaps, but I have seen her crushed by the waterfall of information that is her life. Could I look myself in the mirror without red eyes and quivering jaw and know I have forgotten all that was important to me? I could not and neither can she, for when this odyssey began, that is how I began. Her life, her marriage, her children. Her friends and her work.

The days were hard on both of us. I was an encyclopedia, an object without feeling, of the whos, whats and wheres in her life, when in reality it is the whys, the things I did not know and could not answer, that make it all worth while. She would stare at pictures of forgotten offspring, hold paintbrushes that inspired nothing, and read love letters that brought back no joy. She would weaken over the hours, growing paler, becoming bitter and ending the day worse than when it began. Our days were lost and so was she.

So I changed. I learned what is obvious to a child. That life is simply a collection of little lives, each lived one day at a time. That each day should be spent finding beauty in flowers and poetry and talking to animals. That a day spent with dreaming and sunsets and refreshing breezes cannot be bettered. But most of all, I learned that life is for sitting on benches next to ancient creeks with my hand on her knee and sometimes, on good days, for falling in love.

“WHAT ARE you thinking?” she asks.

It is now dusk. We have left our bench and are shuffling along lighted paths that wind their way around this complex. She is holding my arm and I am her escort. It is her idea to do this. Perhaps she is charmed by me. Perhaps she wants to keep me from falling. Either way, I am smiling to myself.

“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.”

I think about this as we walk in silence, holding each other, past the rooms, past the courtyard. We come to the garden, mainly wild

flowers, and I stop her. I pick a bundle—red, pink, yellow, violet. I give them to her, and she brings them to her nose. She smells them with eyes closed and she whispers, “They're beautiful.” We resume our walk, me in one hand, the flowers in another. People watch us, for we are a walking miracle, or so I am told. It is true in a way.

By the time we reach the doorway, I am tired. She knows this, so she stops me with her hand and makes me face her. I do, and I realize how hunched over I have become. She and I are now level. Sometimes I am glad she doesn't know how much I have changed. She turns to me and stares for a long time.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I don't want to forget you or this day, and I'm trying to keep your memory alive.”

Will it work this time? I wonder, then know it will not. It can't. I do not tell her my thoughts, though. I smile instead because her words are sweet.

“Thank you,” I say.

“I mean it. I don't want to forget you again. You're very special to me. I don't know what I would have done without you today.”

My throat closes a little. There is emotion behind her words, the emotions I feel whenever I think of her. I know this is why I live, and I love her dearly at this moment. How I wish I were strong enough to carry her in my arms to paradise.

“Don't try to say anything,” she tells me. “Let's just feel the moment.”

And I do, and I feel heaven.

HER DISEASE is worse now than it was in the beginning, though Allie is different from most. There are three others with the disease here, and they are the sum of my practical experience of it. They, unlike Allie, are in the most advanced stages of Alzheimer's and are almost completely lost. They wake up hallucinating and confused. They repeat themselves over and over. Seldom do they recognize the people who love them. It is a trying disease, and this is why it is hard for their children and mine to visit.

Allie, of course, has her own problems. She is terribly afraid in the mornings and cries inconsolably. She sees tiny people, like gnomes, I think, watching her, and she screams at them to get away. She bathes willingly but will not eat regularly. She is thin now, much too thin in my opinion, and on good days I do my best to fatten her up.

But this is where the similarity ends. This is why Allie is considered a miracle, because sometimes, just sometimes, after I read to her, her condition isn't so bad. There is no explanation for this. “It's impossible,” the doctors say, “she cannot have Alzheimer's.” But she does. On most days and every morning there can be no doubt.

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. Four times specialists have travelled 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 science 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. 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 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 seem to care.

She inhales slightly at the sight. Her eyes are wide. “Did you do this?”

I nod and she walks into the room.

“It looks beautiful.”

I offer my arm in escort and lead her to the window. She doesn't release it when we get there. Her touch is nice, and we stand close together on this crystal springtime evening. The window is open slightly and I feel a breeze as it fans my cheek. The moon has risen and we watch for a long time as the evening sky unfolds.

“I've never seen anything so beautiful, I'm sure of it,” she says.

“I haven't, either,” I say, but I am looking at her. She knows what I mean and I see her smile.

A moment later she whispers: “I think I know who Allie went

with at the end of the story."

"Who?"

"She went with Noah."

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely."

I smile and nod. "Yes, she did," I say softly, and she smiles back, her face radiant.

She sits and I sit opposite her. She offers her hand across the table and I take it in mine, and I feel her thumb begin to move as it did so many years ago. I stare at her for a long time, living and reliving the moments of my life, remembering it all and making it real. I feel my throat begin to tighten and once again I realize how much I love her.

My voice is shaky when I finally speak.

"You're so beautiful," I say. I can see in her eyes that she knows how I feel about her and what I really mean by my words.

She does not respond. Instead she lowers her eyes and I wonder what she's thinking. She gives me no clues and I gently squeeze her hand. I wait. I know her heart and I know I'm almost there.

And then a miracle that proves me right. As Glenn Miller plays softly in a candlelit room, I watch as she gradually gives in to the feelings inside her. I see a warm smile begin to form on her lips, the kind that makes it all worth while, and I watch as she raises her hazy eyes to mine. She pulls my hand towards her. "You're wonderful..." she says softly, and at that moment she falls in love with me, too; this I know, for I have seen the signs a thousand times.

She says nothing else right away, she doesn't have to, and she gives me a look from another lifetime that makes me whole again. I smile back, with as much passion as I can muster, and we stare at each other with the feelings inside us rolling like ocean waves. I look about the room, then back at Allie, and the way she's looking at me makes me warm. And suddenly I feel young again. I'm no longer cold or aching, or hunched over or almost blind with cataracts. I'm strong and proud and the luckiest man alive, and I keep on feeling that way for a long time.

By the time the candles have burned down a third, I am ready to break the silence. I say, "I love you deeply and I hope you know that."

"Of course I do," she says. "I've always loved you, Noah."

Noah, I hear again. The word echoes in my head. Noah . . .

Noah. She knows, I think to myself, she knows who I am . . .

She knows. . . . Such a tiny thing, this knowledge, but for me it is a gift from God, and I feel our lifetime together, holding her, loving her, and being with her through the best years of my life.

She murmurs, "Noah . . . my sweet Noah ..."

And I, who could not accept the doctors' words, have triumphed again, at least for a moment. I give up the pretence of mystery, and I kiss her hand and bring it to my cheek and whisper in her ear: "You are the greatest thing that has ever happened to me."

"Oh . . . Noah," she says with tears in her eyes, "I love you, too."

IF ONLY IT would end like this, I would be a happy man.

But it won't. Of this I'm sure, for as time slips by I begin to see the signs of concern in her face.

"What's wrong?" I ask, and her answer 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 for ever."

She knows this is all I can do, for neither of us wants empty promises.

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 chews a long time, but I am glad to see her eat. She has lost too much weight in the past three months.

After dinner, I become afraid for I know the bell has tolled this evening. The sun has long since set and the thief is about to come, and there is nothing I can do to stop it. So I stare at her and wait and live a lifetime in these last remaining moments.

The clock ticks.

Nothing.

I take her in my arms and we hold each other.

Nothing.

I feel her tremble and I whisper in her ear.

Nothing.

I tell her for the last time this evening that I love her.

And the thief comes.

It always amazes me how quickly it happens. Even now, after all this time. For as she holds me, she begins to blink rapidly and shake her head. Then, turning towards the corner of the room, she stares for

a long time, concern etched on her face.

No! my mind screams. Not yet! Not now . . . not when we're so close! Not tonight! Any night but tonight. . . . Please! I can't take it again! It isn't fair . . It isn't fair . . .

But once again, it is to no avail.

“Those people,” she finally says, pointing, “are staring at me. Please make them stop.”

The gnomes. A pit rises in my stomach, hard and full. My mouth goes dry and I feel my heart pounding. It is over, I know. This, the evening confusion that affects my wife, is the hardest part of all. For when it comes, she is gone, and sometimes I wonder whether she and I will ever love again.

“There's no one there, Allie,” I say, trying to fend off the inevitable.

She doesn't believe me. “They're staring at me. You can't see them?”

“No,” I say, and she thinks for a moment.

“Well, they're right there,” she says, “and they're staring at me.”

With that, she begins to talk to herself, and moments later, when I try to comfort her, she flinches with wide eyes.

“Who are you?” she cries in panic, her face becoming whiter. “What are you doing here?” She backs away from me, her hands in a defensive position, and then she says the most heartbreaking words of all. “Go away! Stay away from me!” She is pushing the gnomes away from her, terrified, oblivious of my presence.

I stand and cross the room to her bed. I am weak now, my legs ache, and there is a strange pain in my side. It is a struggle to press the button to call the nurses, for my fingers are throbbing and seem frozen together, but I finally succeed. They will be here soon now, I know, and I wait for them.

I sit by the bed with an aching back and start to cry as I pick up the notebook. 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 and the old man who loves her more deeply than life itself crying softly in the corner, his face in his hands.

BY THE following week, my life had pretty much returned to normal. Or at least as normal as my life could be. Reading to Allie, who was unable to recognize me at any time, reading to others, wandering the halls. Lying awake at night and sitting by my heater in the morning. I found a strange comfort in the predictability of my life.

On a cool, foggy morning eight days after she and I had spent our day together, I woke early, as is my custom, and pottered around my desk, alternately looking at photographs and reading letters written many years before. At least I tried to. I couldn't concentrate too well because I had a headache, so I put them aside and went to sit in my chair by the window to watch the sun come up. Allie would be awake in a couple of hours, I knew, and I wanted to be refreshed, for reading all day would only make my head hurt more.

I closed my eyes for a few minutes then, opening them, I watched my old friend, the creek, roll by my window. Unlike Allie I had been given a room where I could see it, and it has never failed to inspire me. It is a contradiction this creek—a hundred thousand years old but renewed with each rainfall. It is life, I think, to watch the water. A man can learn so many things.

It happened as I sat in the chair, just as the sun peeped over the horizon. My hand, I noticed, started to tingle, something it had never done before. I started to lift it, but I was forced to stop when my head pounded again, this time hard, almost as if I had been hit in the head with a hammer. I closed my eyes tightly. My hand stopped tingling and began to go numb, as if my nerves had been severed somewhere on my lower arm. A shooting pain rocked my head and seemed to flow down my neck and into every cell of my body, like a tidal wave, crushing and wasting everything in its path.

I lost my sight and I heard what sounded like a train roaring inches from my head, and I knew that I was having a stroke. The pain coursed through my body like a lightning bolt, and in my last remaining moments of consciousness I pictured Allie, lying in her bed, waiting for the story I would never read, lost and confused, completely and totally unable to help herself.

I WAS UNCONSCIOUS on and off for days, and in those moments when I was awake I found myself hooked to machines, two bags of fluid hanging near the bed. I could hear the faint hum of machines, sometimes making sounds I could not recognize, and found myself lulled to never-never land time and time again.

I could see the concern in the doctors' faces as they scanned the charts and adjusted the machines. 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 afterwards, but instead concentrated on Allie, bringing a picture of

her to my mind whenever I could. I tried to feel her touch, hear her voice, and when I did tears would fill my eyes because I didn't know if I would be able to hold her again. This was not how I'd imagined it would end. I'd always assumed I would go last.

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.

“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. 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 my cane or wheelchair, so I must march now to my own unique cadence to keep upright. Not left-right-left as in my youth, or even the shuffle-shuffle of late, but rather slow-shuffle, slide-the-right, slow-shuffle. I am on an epic adventure now when I travel the halls.

When I return to my room, I know I will not sleep. I breathe deeply and smell the springtime fragrances that filter through the open window. There is a slight chill in the air and I find that I am invigorated by the change in temperature. Evelyn, one of the many nurses here, helps me to the chair by the window. She puts her hand on my shoulder and pats it gently. She says nothing, and by her silence I know that she is staring out of the window. Then she leans forward and tenderly kisses me on the cheek.

“It's good to have you back. Allie's missed you and so have the rest of us. We were all praying for you because it's just not the same around here when you're gone.” She smiles at me and touches my face before she leaves. I say nothing.

The stars are out tonight and the crickets are singing. As I sit, I wonder if anyone outside can see me, this prisoner of flesh. I search the courtyard, looking for signs of life, but there is nothing. Even the creek is still. In the darkness it looks like empty space and I find that I'm drawn to its mystery. I watch for hours, and as I do I see the reflection of clouds on the water. A storm is coming and in time the

sky will turn silver, like dusk again.

Lightning cuts the wild sky and I feel my mind drift back. Who are we, Allie and I? Are we ancient ivy on a cypress tree, tendrils and branches intertwined so closely that we would both die if we were forced apart? Another bolt and the table beside me is lit enough to enable me to see a picture of Allie, the best one I have. I had it framed years ago in the hope that the glass would make it last for ever. I reach for it and hold it inches from my face. She was forty-one when it was taken, and she had never been more beautiful. There are so many things I want to ask her, but I know the picture won't answer, so I put it aside.

I finally stand and walk to my desk and turn on the lamp. This takes more effort than I think it will, and I am strained, so I do not return to the window seat. I sit down and spend a few minutes looking at the pictures on my desk. Family pictures, pictures of children and vacations. Pictures of Allie and me.

Since this seems to be a night of memories, I look for and find my wedding ring. It is in the top drawer, wrapped in tissue. I cannot wear it any more because my knuckles are swollen and my fingers lack for blood. I unwrap the tissue and find it unchanged. It is powerful—a symbol, a circle—and I know, I know, there could never have been another. I whisper aloud, “I am still yours, Allie, my queen, my timeless beauty. You are, and always have been, the best thing in my life.”

It is eleven thirty and I look for the letter she wrote to me, the one I read when the mood strikes me. I find it where I last left it. I open it and my hands begin to tremble:

Dear Noah,

I write this letter by candlelight as you lie sleeping in the bedroom we have shared since the day we were married. I see the flame beside me and it reminds me of another fire from decades ago, with me in your soft clothes, and I knew then we would always be together, even though I wavered the following day. My heart had been captured 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 day after my mother left. I was so scared because I was sure you would never forgive me for leaving you. I was shaking as I got out of the car, but you took it all

away with your smile. “How about some coffee?” was all you said. And you never brought it up again in all our years together.

Nor did you question me when I would leave and walk alone during the next few days. When I came in with tears in my eyes, you always knew whether I needed you to hold me or to just let me be. I don't know how but you did, and you made it easier for me. Later, when we went to the small chapel and exchanged our rings and made our vows, I looked into your eyes and knew I had made the right decision. More than that, I knew I was foolish for ever considering someone else. I have never wavered since.

We had a wonderful life together, and I think about it a lot now. I close my eyes sometimes and see you with speckles of grey in your hair, sitting on the porch and playing your guitar while little ones play and clap to the music you create. “You're a better father than you know,” I tell you later, after the children are sleeping.

I love you for many things, especially your passions: love and poetry and fatherhood and friendship and beauty and nature. And I am glad you have taught the children these things, for I know their lives are better for it. They tell me how special you are to them, and it makes me feel like the luckiest woman alive.

You have taught me as well, and inspired me and supported me in my painting, and you will never know how much it has meant to me that you were always there, encouraging me. You understood my need for my own studio, my own space, and saw beyond the paint on my clothes and in my hair. I know it was not easy. It takes a man to do that, Noah, to live with something like that. And you have. For forty-five years now. Wonderful years.

You are my best friend as well as my lover, and I do not know which side of you I enjoy the most. I treasure each side, just as I have treasured our life together. You have something inside you, Noah, something beautiful and strong. Kindness, that's what I see when I look at you now, that's what everyone sees. Kindness.

I know you think me crazy for making us write our story before we finally leave our home, but I have my reasons and I thank you for your patience. I never told you why, but now I think it is time you knew. We have lived a lifetime most couples never know, and when I look at you I am frightened by the knowledge that all this will be ending soon. For we both know my prognosis. I worry more about you than I do about me, because I fear the pain I know you will go through. There are no words to express my sorrow for this.

I love you so deeply, so incredibly much, that I will find a 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—we both know they will come. Know that I will always love you, and no matter what happens, know that I have led the greatest life possible. My life with you.

Noah, wherever you are and whenever you read this, I love you. I love you deeply, my husband. You are, and always have been, my dream.

Allie

I put the letter aside, rise from my desk and find my slippers. I must sit to put them on. Then, standing, I cross the room and open my door. I peep down the hall and see Janice seated at the main desk which I must pass to get to Allie's room. At this hour I am not supposed to leave my room, and Janice is never one to bend the rules.

I wait to see if she will leave, but she does not and I grow impatient. I finally exit my room anyway, slow-shuffle, slide-the-right, slow-shuffle. It takes aeons to close the distance, but for some reason she does not see me approaching. I am a silent panther creeping through the jungle. In the end I am discovered, but I am not surprised. I stand before her.

“Noah,” she says, “what are you doing?”

“I'm taking a walk,” I say. “I can't sleep.”

“You know you're not supposed to do this.”

“I know.” I don't move, though. I am determined.

“You're not really going for a walk, are you? You're going to see Allie.”

“Yes,” I answer.

“Noah, you know what happened the last time you saw her at night. You shouldn't be doing this.”

“I miss her.”

“I know you do, but I can't let you see her.”

“It's our anniversary,” I say. This is true. It is one year before gold. Forty-nine years today.

“I see.” She looks away for a moment, and her voice becomes softer. I am surprised. She has never struck me as the sentimental

type. “Noah, I've seen hundreds of couples struggle with grief, but I've never seen anyone handle it like you do. No one around here has ever seen anything like it.” She pauses for just a moment and her eyes begin to fill with tears. “I try to think what it's like for you, how you keep going day after day, but I can't imagine it. I don't know how you do it. You even beat her disease sometimes. Even though the doctors don't understand it, we nurses do. It's love—it's as simple as that. It's the most incredible thing I've ever seen.”

A lump has risen in my throat, and I am speechless.

“But, Noah, you're not supposed to do this, and I can't let you. So go back to your room.” Then, smiling, sniffling and shuffling some papers, she says: “Me, I'm going downstairs for some coffee. I won't be back to check on you for a while, so don't do anything foolish.”

She rises quickly, touches my arm and walks towards the stairs. She doesn't look back and suddenly I am alone. I look at where she had been sitting and see her coffee, a full cup, still steaming, and once again I learn that there are good people in the world.

As I begin my trek to Allie's room, I take tiny steps, and even at that pace my legs grow tired. I find I must touch the wall to keep from falling down. Lights buzz overhead, their fluorescent glow making my eyes ache, and I squint a little. I press on, and the movement forces blood through banished arteries. I feel myself becoming stronger with every step. A phone rings in the nurses' station, and I push forward so that I will not be caught. I am young and strong, with passion in my heart, and I will break down the door and lift her in my arms and carry her to paradise.

Who am I kidding? I lead a simple life now. I am foolish, an old man in love, a dreamer who dreams of nothing but reading to Allie and holding her whenever I can. I am a sinner with many faults and a man who believes in magic, but I am too old to change and too old to care.

When I finally reach her room my body is weak. My legs wobble, my eyes are blurred. I struggle with the knob and in the end it takes two hands and three truckloads of effort. The door opens and light from the hallway spills in, illuminating the bed where she sleeps.

She is lying with the covers halfway up. After a moment I see her roll to one side, and her noises bring back memories of happier times. She looks small in her bed.

I do not move, on this our anniversary, for almost a minute, and I

long to tell her how I feel, but I stay quiet so I won't wake her. Besides, it is written on the slip of paper that I will slide under her pillow. It says:

Love, in these last and tender hours,
is sensitive and very pure
Come morning light with soft-lit powers
to awaken love that's ever sure.

I think I hear someone coming, so I enter her room and close the door behind me. Blackness descends and I cross her floor from memory and reach the window. I open the curtains, and the moon stares back, large and full, the guardian of the evening. Though I know I should not, I sit on her bed while I slip the note beneath her pillow. Then I reach across and gently touch her face. I stroke her hair, and I feel wonder, like a composer first discovering the works of Mozart. She stirs and opens her eyes and I suddenly regret my foolishness, for I know she will begin to cry and scream, for this is what she always does. But I feel an urge to attempt the impossible and lean towards her, our faces drawing closer.

When her lips meet mine, I feel a tingling I have never felt before, in all our years together, but I do not pull back. And suddenly a miracle, for I feel her mouth open and I discover a forgotten paradise, unchanged all this time, ageless like the stars. I feel the warmth of her body and allow myself to slip away, as I did so many years ago. I close my eyes and become a mighty ship in churning waters, strong and fearless, and she is my sails. I gently trace the outline of her cheek, then take her hand in mine. I kiss her lips, her cheeks, and listen as she takes a breath. She murmurs softly, “Oh, Noah . . . I've missed you.” Another miracle—the greatest of all! — and there's no way I can stop the tears as we begin to slip towards heaven itself. For at that moment, the world is full of wonder as I feel her fingers reach for the buttons on my shirt and slowly, ever so slowly, she begins to undo them one by one.

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