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A Novel by the
#1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author

NICHOLAS
SPARKS

The Guardian



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**PRAISE FOR THE NOVELS OF
#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING
AUTHOR NICHOLAS SPARKS**

THE GUARDIAN

“Compelling action....Sparks’s fans clamor for his brand of love story, and, with the added punch of suspense, this one will be another bestseller.”
—*Publishers Weekly*

“An exciting mystery....Fans of Sparks won’t be disappointed.”
—*Southern Pines Pilot (NC)*

“Fans everywhere are familiar with Nicholas Sparks’s poignant, emotionally driven novels....Sparks’s latest is proof that he’s just as proficient writing suspenseful fiction as he is writing classic tearjerkers.”
—*Romantic Times*

“Sparks proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that he can create chills and thrills with a deft hand.”
—*RomanceReadersConnection.com*

“A thriller filled with suspense that will not allow you to put down the book. Nicholas Sparks with a new dimension.... You will not be disappointed.”
—*ReviewingTheEvidence.com*

“Nicholas Sparks is a top-notch writer. He has created a truly spine-tingling thriller exploring love and obsession with a kind of suspense never before experienced in his novels.”
—*RedBank.com*

“A real page-turner sure to delight his dedicated fans and land him a whole new fan base at the same time. The characters are so real....Sparks has nailed the stalker’s character so well, it’s downright creepy.”
—*FictionAddiction.net*

“An engaging, compelling read....As usual, Sparks creates a community of very real characters.” —BookLoons.com

“Exhilarating, dark romantic suspense.” —Writerspace.com

“A well-crafted love story...a surprising thriller.”
—Bookreporter.com

“The right balance between love story and thriller...move over, Mary Higgins Clark.” —TheBookHaven.net

NIGHTS IN RODANTHE

“Bittersweet...romance blooms....You’ll cry in spite of yourself.”
—People

“Passionate and memorable...smooth, sensitive writing....This is a novel that can hold its own.” —Associated Press

“Extremely hard to put down...a love story, and a good love story at that.” —Boston Herald

A BEND IN THE ROAD

“Sweet, accessible, uplifting...expect instant bestsellerdom.”
—Publishers Weekly

“A powerful tale of true love.” —Booklist

“A charming and thoughtful love story....Don’t miss it; this is a book that’s light on the surface but with subtle depths.”
—BookLoons.com

“A moving story. Nicholas Sparks fans will love it.”
—TheBookHaven.net

THE RESCUE

“A modern master of fateful love stories.” —BookPage.com

“A romantic page-turner....Sparks’s fans won’t be disappointed.”
—Glamour

"All of Sparks's trademark elements—love, loss, and small town life—are present in this terrific read." —*Booklist*

A WALK TO REMEMBER

"An extraordinary book...touching, at times riveting...a book you won't soon forget." —*Sunday New York Post*

"A sweet tale of young but everlasting love." —*Chicago Sun-Times*

"Bittersweet...a tragic yet spiritual love story." —*Variety*

"Sparks proves once again that he is a master at pulling heart-strings...it will enthrall Sparks's numerous fans." —*Booklist*

MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE

"The novel's unabashed emotion—and an unexpected turn—will put tears in your eyes." —*People*

"Glow with moments of tenderness...has the potential to delve deeply into the mysteries of eternal love." —*Cleveland Plain Dealer*

"Deeply moving, beautifully written, and extremely romantic." —*Booklist*

"Brew the tea or pour a glass of wine—whatever is your pleasure. And settle in...you're in for another treat." —*Oakland Press*

THE NOTEBOOK

"Nicholas Sparks...will not let you go. His novel shines." —*Dallas Morning News*

"Proves that good things come in small packages...a classic tale of love." —*Christian Science Monitor*

"The lyrical beauty of this touching love story...will captivate the heart of every reader...and establish Nicholas Sparks as a gifted novelist." —*Rocky Mountain News*

Books by Nicholas Sparks

The Notebook

Message in a Bottle

A Walk to Remember

The Rescue

A Bend in the Road

Nights in Rodanthe

The Guardian

The Wedding

Three Weeks with My Brother (with Micah Sparks)

True Believer

At First Sight

Dear John

The Choice

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For Larry Kirshbaum and Maureen Egen
Wonderful people, wonderful friends .

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Prologue

Christmas Eve 1998

Exactly forty days after she'd last held the hand of her husband, Julie Barenson sat looking through her window toward the quiet streets of Swansboro. It was cold; the sky had been angry for a week, and the rain made gentle tapping sounds against the window. Trees were barren, their cragged limbs curling in the frigid air like arthritic fingers.

She knew Jim would have wanted her to listen to music tonight; she could hear Bing Crosby singing "White Christmas" in the background. She'd put up the tree for him as well, though by the time she'd made that decision, the only trees left were dried out and sparse, free for the taking outside the supermarket. It didn't matter. Even when she finished decorating it, she couldn't summon the energy to care. It had been hard to feel anything at all since the tumor in Jim's brain finally took his life.

At twenty-five, she was a widow and she hated every-

thing about the word: how it sounded, what it implied, the way her mouth moved when she formed the word. She avoided it completely. If people asked how she was doing, she simply shrugged. But sometimes, just sometimes, she had the urge to answer. *You want to know what it was like to lose my husband?* she wanted to ask. *Here's what it's like.*

Jim's dead, and now that he's gone, I feel like I'm dead, too.

Is that, Julie wondered, what people wanted to hear? Or did they want platitudes? *I'll be okay. It's hard, but I'll make it through this. Thank you for asking.* She could do the brave soldier routine, she supposed, but she never had. It was both easier and more honest to simply shrug and say nothing.

After all, she didn't feel as if she were going to be okay. Half the time, she didn't think she was going to make it through the day without breaking down. Especially on nights like tonight.

In the reflected glow of the Christmas tree lights, Julie put her hand to the window, feeling the cold press of glass against her skin.

Mabel had asked if she'd wanted to have dinner tonight, but Julie had declined. So had Mike and Henry and Emma, but she'd turned them down as well. All of them understood. Or, rather, they pretended to understand, since it was obvious that none of them thought she should be alone. And maybe they were right. Everything in the house, everything she saw and smelled and touched, reminded her of Jim. His clothes took up half the closet, his razor still sat next to the soap dish in the bathroom, the subscription to *Sports Illustrated* had come in the mail the day before. There were still two bottles of

Heineken, his favorite, in the refrigerator. Earlier that evening, when she'd seen them on the shelf, she'd whispered to herself, "Jim is never going to drink those," and she'd closed the door and leaned against it, crying in the kitchen for an hour.

The scene outside her window was out of focus; lost in her thoughts, Julie gradually registered the faint sound of a branch thumping against the wall. The thumping was persistent, steady, and it was a moment before she realized she'd been mistaken about the branch.

Someone was knocking at the door.

Julie stood, her movements lethargic. At the door, she paused to run her hands through her hair, hoping to compose herself. If it was her friends checking in on her, she didn't want them to think she needed them to stay for a while. When she opened the door, however, she was surprised to see a young man in a yellow slicker. In his hands was a large, wrapped box.

"Mrs. Barensen?" he asked.

"Yes?"

The stranger took a hesitant step forward. "I'm supposed to deliver this to you. My dad said it was important."

"Your dad?"

"He wanted to make sure you got this tonight."

"Do I know him?"

"I don't know. But he was pretty insistent about it. It's a gift from someone."

"Who?"

"My father said you'd understand as soon as you opened it. Don't shake it, though—and keep this end up."

The young man pushed the box into Julie's arms before she could stop him, then turned to leave.

"Wait," she said, "I don't understand. . . ."

The young man glanced over his shoulder. "Merry Christmas," he said.

Julie stood in the doorway, watching as he climbed into his truck. Then, back inside, she set the box on the floor in front of the tree and knelt beside it. A quick peek confirmed the absence of a card, and there were no other clues about the sender. She loosened the ribbon, then lifted the separately wrapped lid and found herself staring wordlessly at what she'd been given.

It was matted with fuzz and dwarflike, no more than a few pounds, and it was sitting on its haunches in the corner of the box, looking just about as ugly as she'd ever seen a puppy look. Its head was large, out of proportion to the rest of its body. Whimpering, it looked up at her, a glob of muck in its eyes.

Someone, she thought, bought me a puppy. An ugly puppy.

Taped to the inside of the box was an envelope. As she reached for it, it dawned on her that she recognized the handwriting, and she paused. No, she thought, it can't be. . . .

She had seen that handwriting on the love letters he'd written to her on their anniversaries, on hastily scrawled messages by the phone, on paperwork he'd piled on the desk. She held the envelope in front of her, reading her name over and over. Then, with trembling hands, she took the letter out. Her eyes traveled to the words written in the upper left corner.

Dear Jules,

It was Jim's nickname for her, and Julie closed her eyes, feeling as if her body were suddenly growing smaller. She forced herself to take a deep breath and started again.

Dear Jules,

I know that if you're reading this letter, I've already passed away. I don't know how long I've been gone, but I hope you've been able to begin healing. I know that if I were in your position, it would be hard for me, but you know I've always believed you were the stronger of the two of us.

I bought you a dog, as you can see. Harold Kuphaldt was a friend of my father's, and he's been raising Great Danes since I was a kid. I always wanted one when I was little, but since the house was so small, Mom always said no. They are big dogs, granted, but according to Harold, they're also just about the sweetest dogs in the world. I hope you enjoy him (or her).

I guess I always knew in the back of my mind that I wasn't going to make it. I didn't want to think about it, though, because I knew that you didn't have anyone to help you get through something like this. Family, I mean. It broke my heart to think that you would be all alone. Not knowing what else to do, I made arrangements to get you this dog.

If you don't like it, you don't have to keep it, of course. Harold said he'd take it back, no problem. (His number should be included.)

I hope you're doing all right. Since I got sick, I've worried nonstop about that. I love you, Jules, I really do. I was the luckiest guy in the world when you came into my life. It would break my heart if I thought you'd never be happy again. So please do that for me. Be happy again. Find someone who makes you happy. It might be hard, you might not think it's possible, but I'd like you to try. The world is a better place when you smile.

And don't worry. From wherever I am, I'll watch out

for you. I'll be your guardian angel, sweetheart. You can count on me to keep you safe.

I love you,

Jim

Through her tears, Julie peeked over the lid of the box and reached in. The puppy curled into her hand. She lifted him out, holding him close to her face. He was tiny, and she could feel the bones in his ribs as he trembled.

He really was an ugly thing, she thought. And he'd grow up to be the size of a small horse. What on earth would she do with a dog like this?

Why, she wondered, couldn't Jim have gotten her a miniature schnauzer with little gray whiskers or a cocker spaniel with sad, round eyes? Something manageable? Something cute, that might curl up in her lap now and then?

The puppy, a male, started to whine, a high-pitched cry that rose and fell like the echo of far-off train whistles.

"Shh . . . you'll be okay," she whispered. "I won't hurt you. . . ."

She continued to talk to the puppy in low tones, letting him get used to her, still getting used to the idea that Jim had done this for her. The puppy continued to cry, almost as if accompanying the tune on the stereo, and Julie scratched beneath his chin.

"You singing to me?" she asked, smiling softly for the first time. "That's what it sounds like, you know."

For a moment, the dog stopped crying and looked up at her, holding her gaze. Then he started to whine again, though this time he didn't seem as frightened.

"Singer," she whispered. "I'll think I'll call you Singer."

One



Four Years Later

In the years since Jim had died, Julie Barenson had somehow found a way to start living again. It hadn't happened right away. The first couple of years after his death had been difficult and lonely, but time had eventually worked its magic on Julie, changing her loss into something softer. Though she loved Jim and knew that part of her would *always* love Jim, the pain wasn't as sharp as it had once been. She could remember her tears and the total vacuum her life had become in the aftermath of his death, but the searing ache of those days was behind her. Now when she thought of Jim, she remembered him with a smile, thankful that he'd been part of her life.

She was thankful for Singer, too. Jim had done the right thing by getting her the dog. In a way, Singer had made it possible for her to go on.

But at this moment, while lying in bed on a cool spring morning in Swansboro, North Carolina, Julie wasn't thinking about what a wonderful support Singer had been