


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

# NICHOLAS SPARKS

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*Dear John*



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**WARNER BOOKS**

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# Prologue

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*Lenoir, 2006*

**W**hat does it mean to truly love another?

There was a time in my life when I thought I knew the answer: It meant that I'd care for Savannah more deeply than I cared for myself and that we'd spend the rest of our lives together. It wouldn't have taken much. She once told me that the key to happiness was achievable dreams, and hers were nothing out of the ordinary. Marriage, family . . . the basics. It meant I'd have a steady job, the house with the white picket fence, and a minivan or SUV big enough to haul our kids to school or to the dentist or off to soccer practice or piano recitals. Two or three kids, she was never clear on that, but my hunch is that when the time came, she would have suggested that we let nature take its course and allow God to make the decision. She was like that—religious, I mean—and I suppose that was part of the reason I fell for her. But no matter what was going on in our lives, I could imagine lying beside her in bed at the end of the day, holding her while we talked and laughed, lost in each other's arms.

It doesn't sound so far-fetched, right? When two people love each other? That's what I thought, too. And while part of me still

wants to believe it's possible, I know it's not going to happen. When I leave here again, I'll never come back.

For now, though, I'll sit on the hillside overlooking her ranch and wait for her to appear. She won't be able to see me, of course. In the army, you learn to blend into your surroundings, and I learned well, because I had no desire to die in some backward foreign dump in the middle of the Iraqi desert. But I had to come back to this small North Carolina mountain town to find out what happened. When a person sets a thing in motion, there's a feeling of unease, almost regret, until you learn the truth.

But of this I am certain: Savannah will never know I've been here today.

Part of me aches at the thought of her being so close yet so untouchable, but her story and mine are different now. It wasn't easy for me to accept this simple truth, because there was a time when our stories were the same, but that was six years and two lifetimes ago. There are memories for both of us, of course, but I've learned that memories can have a physical, almost living presence, and in this, Savannah and I are different as well. If hers are stars in the nighttime sky, mine are the haunted empty spaces in between. And unlike her, I've been burdened by questions I've asked myself a thousand times since the last time we were together. Why did I do it? And would I do it again?

It was I, you see, who ended it.

On the trees surrounding me, the leaves are just beginning their slow turn toward the color of fire, glowing as the sun peeks over the horizon. Birds have begun their morning calls, and the air is perfumed with the scent of pine and earth; different from the brine and salt of my hometown. In time, the front door cracks open, and it's then that I see her. Despite the distance between us, I find myself holding my breath as she steps into the dawn. She stretches before descending the front steps and heads around the side. Beyond her, the horse pasture shimmers like a green ocean, and she passes through the gate that leads toward

it. A horse calls out a greeting, as does another, and my first thought is that Savannah seems too small to be moving so easily among them. But she was always comfortable with horses, and they were comfortable with her. A half dozen nibble on grass near the fence post, mainly quarter horses, and Midas, her white-socked black Arabian, stands off to one side. I rode with her once, luckily without injury, and as I was hanging on for dear life, I remember thinking that she looked so relaxed in the saddle that she could have been watching television. Savannah takes a moment to greet Midas now. She rubs his nose while she whispers something, she pats his haunches, and when she turns away, his ears prick up as she heads toward the barn.

She vanishes, then emerges again, carrying two pails—oats, I think. She hangs the pails on two fence posts, and a couple of the horses trot toward them. When she steps back to make room, I see her hair flutter in the breeze before she retrieves a saddle and bridle. While Midas eats, she readies him for her ride, and a few minutes later she's leading him from the pasture, toward the trails in the forest, looking exactly as she did six years ago. I know it isn't true—I saw her up close last year and noticed the first fine lines beginning to form around her eyes—but the prism through which I view her remains for me unchanging. To me, she will always be twenty-one and I will always be twenty-three. I'd been stationed in Germany; I had yet to go to Fallujah or Baghdad or receive her letter, which I read in the railroad station in Samawah in the initial weeks of the campaign; I had yet to return home from the events that changed the course of my life.

Now, at twenty-nine, I sometimes wonder about the choices I've made. The army has become the only life I know. I don't know whether I should be pissed or pleased about that fact; most of the time, I find myself going back and forth, depending on the day. When people ask, I tell them I'm a grunt, and I mean it. I still live on base in Germany, I have maybe a thousand dollars in



savings, and I haven't been on a date in years. I don't surf much anymore even on leave, but on my days off I ride my Harley north or south, wherever my mood strikes me. The Harley was the single best thing I've ever bought for myself, though it cost a fortune over there. It suits me, since I've become something of a loner. Most of my buddies have left the service, but I'll probably get sent back to Iraq in the next couple of months. At least, those are the rumors around base. When I first met Savannah Lynn Curtis—to me, she'll always be Savannah Lynn Curtis—I could never have predicted my life would turn out the way it has or believed I'd make the army my career.

But I did meet her; that's the thing that makes my current life so strange. I fell in love with her when we were together, then fell deeper in love with her in the years we were apart. Our story has three parts: a beginning, a middle, and an end. And although this is the way all stories unfold, I still can't believe that ours didn't go on forever.

I reflect on these things, and as always, our time together comes back to me. I find myself remembering how it began, for now these memories are all I have left.

# PART I

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# One

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*Wilmington, 2000*

My name is John Tyree. I was born in 1977, and I grew up in Wilmington, North Carolina, a city that proudly boasts the largest port in the state as well as a long and vibrant history but now strikes me more as a city that came about by accident. Sure, the weather was great and the beaches perfect, but it wasn't ready for the wave of Yankee retirees up north who wanted someplace cheap to spend their golden years. The city is located on a relatively thin spit of land bounded by the Cape Fear River on one side and the ocean on the other. Highway 17—which leads to Myrtle Beach and Charleston—bisects the town and serves as its major road. When I was a kid, my dad and I could drive from the historic district near the Cape Fear River to Wrightsville Beach in ten minutes, but so many stoplights and shopping centers have been added that it can now take an hour, especially on the weekends, when the tourists come flooding in. Wrightsville Beach, located on an island just off the coast, is on the northern end of Wilmington and far and away one of the most popular beaches in the state. The homes along the dunes are ridiculously expensive, and most of them are rented out all summer long. The Outer

Banks may have more romantic appeal because of their isolation and wild horses and that flight that Orville and Wilbur were famous for, but let me tell you, most people who go to the beach on vacation feel most at home when they can find a McDonald's or Burger King nearby, in case the little ones aren't too fond of the local fare, and want more than a couple of choices when it comes to evening activities.

Like all cities, Wilmington is rich in places and poor in others, and since my dad had one of the steadiest, solid-citizen jobs on the planet—he drove a mail delivery route for the post office—we did okay. Not great, but okay. We weren't rich, but we lived close enough to the rich area for me to attend one of the best high schools in the city. Unlike my friends' homes, though, our house was old and small; part of the porch had begun to sag, but the yard was its saving grace. There was a big oak tree in the backyard, and when I was eight years old, I built a tree house with scraps of wood I collected from a construction site. My dad didn't help me with the project (if he hit a nail with a hammer, it could honestly be called an accident); it was the same summer I taught myself to surf. I suppose I should have realized then how different I was from my dad, but that just shows how little you know about life when you're a kid.

My dad and I were as different as two people could possibly be. Where he was passive and introspective, I was always in motion and hated to be alone; while he placed a high value on education, school for me was like a social club with sports added in. He had poor posture and tended to shuffle when he walked; I bounced from here to there, forever asking him to time how long it took me to run to the end of the block and back. I was taller than him by the time I was in eighth grade and could beat him in arm-wrestling a year later. Our physical features were completely different, too. While he had sandy hair, hazel eyes, and freckles, I had brown hair and eyes, and my olive skin would darken to a deep tan by May. Our differences struck some of our neighbors as

odd, which made sense, I suppose, considering that he'd raised me by himself. As I grew older, I sometimes heard them whispering about the fact that my mom had run off when I was less than a year old. Though I later suspected my mom had met someone else, my dad never confirmed this. All he'd say was that she'd realized she made a mistake in getting married so young, and that she wasn't ready to be a mother. He neither heaped scorn on her nor praised her, but he made sure that I included her in my prayers, no matter where she was or what she'd done. "You remind me of her," he'd say sometimes. To this day, I've never spoken a single word to her, nor do I have any desire to do so.

I think my dad was happy. I phrase it like this because he seldom showed much emotion. Hugs and kisses were a rarity for me growing up, and when they did happen, they often struck me as lifeless, something he did because he felt he was supposed to, not because he wanted to. I know he loved me by the way he devoted himself to my care, but he was forty-three when he had me, and part of me thinks my dad would have been better suited to being a monk than a parent. He was the quietest man I've ever known. He asked few questions about what was going on in my life, and while he rarely grew angry, he rarely joked, either. He lived for routine. He cooked me scrambled eggs, toast, and bacon every single morning and listened as I talked about school over a dinner he'd prepared as well. He scheduled visits to the dentist two months in advance, paid his bills on Saturday morning, did the laundry on Sunday afternoon, and left the house every morning at exactly 7:35 a.m. He was socially awkward and spent long hours alone every day, dropping packages and bunches of mail into the mailboxes along his route. He didn't date, nor did he spend weekend nights playing poker with his buddies; the telephone could stay silent for weeks. When it did ring, it was either a wrong number or a telemarketer. I know how hard it must have been for him to raise me on his own, but he never complained, even when I disappointed him.

I spent most of my evenings alone. With the duties of the day finally completed, my dad would head to his den to be with his coins. That was his one great passion in life. He was most content while sitting in his den, studying a coin dealer newsletter nicknamed the *Greysheet* and trying to figure out the next coin he should add to his collection. Actually, it was my grandfather who originally started the coin collection. My grandfather's hero was a man named Louis Eliasberg, a Baltimore financier who is the only person to have assembled a complete collection of United States coins, including all the various dates and mint marks. His collection rivaled, if not surpassed, the collection at the Smithsonian, and after the death of my grandmother in 1951, my grandfather became transfixed by the idea of building a collection with his son. During the summers, my grandfather and dad would travel by train to the various mints to collect the new coins firsthand or visit various coin shows in the Southeast. In time, my grandfather and dad established relationships with coin dealers across the country, and my grandfather spent a fortune over the years trading up and improving the collection. Unlike Louis Eliasberg, however, my grandfather wasn't rich—he owned a general store in Burgaw that went out of business when the Piggly Wiggly opened its doors across town—and never had a chance at matching Eliasberg's collection. Even so, every extra dollar went into coins. My grandfather wore the same jacket for thirty years, drove the same car his entire life, and I'm pretty sure my dad went to work for the postal service instead of heading off to college because there wasn't a dime left over to pay for anything beyond a high school education. He was an odd duck, that's for sure, as was my dad. Like father, like son, as the old saying goes. When the old man finally passed away, he specified in his will that his house be sold and the money used to purchase even more coins, which was exactly what my dad probably would have done anyway.

By the time my dad inherited the collection, it was already quite valuable. When inflation went through the roof and gold hit

\$850 an ounce, it was worth a small fortune, more than enough for my frugal dad to retire a few times over and more than it would be worth a quarter century later. But neither my grandfather nor my dad had been into collecting for the money; they were in it for the thrill of the hunt and the bond it created between them. There was something exciting about searching long and hard for a specific coin, finally locating it, then wheeling and dealing to get it for the right price. Sometimes a coin was affordable, other times it wasn't, but each and every piece they added was a treasure. My dad hoped to share the same passion with me, including the sacrifice it required. Growing up, I had to sleep with extra blankets in the winter, and I got a single pair of new shoes every year; there was never money for my clothes, unless they came from the Salvation Army. My dad didn't even own a camera. The only picture ever taken of us was at a coin show in Atlanta. A dealer snapped it as we stood before his booth and sent it to us. For years it was perched on my dad's desk. In the photo, my dad had his arm draped over my shoulder, and we were both beaming. In my hand, I was holding a 1926-D buffalo nickel in gem condition, a coin that my dad had just purchased. It was among the rarest of all buffalo nickels, and we ended up eating hot dogs and beans for a month, since it cost more than he'd expected.

But I didn't mind the sacrifices—for a while, anyway. When my dad started talking to me about coins—I must have been in the first or second grade at the time—he spoke to me like an equal. Having an adult, especially your dad, treat you like an equal is a heady thing for any young child, and I basked in the attention, absorbing the information. In time, I could tell you how many Saint-Gaudens double eagles were minted in 1927 as compared with 1924 and why an 1895 Barber dime minted in New Orleans was ten times more valuable than the same coin minted in the same year in Philadelphia. I still can, by the way. Yet unlike my dad, I eventually began to grow out of my passion for collecting. It was all my dad seemed able to talk about, and after six or seven



years of weekends spent with him instead of friends, I wanted out. Like most boys, I started to care about other things: sports and girls and cars and music, primarily, and by fourteen, I was spending little time at home. My resentment began to grow as well. Little by little, I began to notice differences in the way we lived when I compared myself with most of my friends. While they had money to spend to go to the movies or buy a stylish pair of sunglasses, I found myself scrounging for quarters in the couch to buy myself a burger at McDonald's. More than a few of my friends received cars for their sixteenth birthday; my dad gave me an 1883 Morgan silver dollar that had been minted in Carson City. Tears in our worn couch were covered by a blanket, and we were the only family I knew who didn't have cable television or a microwave oven. When our refrigerator broke down, he bought a used one that was the world's most awful shade of green, a color that matched nothing else in the kitchen. I was embarrassed at the thought of having friends come over, and I blamed my dad for that. I know it was a pretty crappy way to feel—if the lack of money bothered me so much, I could have mowed lawns or worked odd jobs, for instance—but that's the way it was. I was as blind as a snail and dumb as a camel, but even if I told you I regret my immaturity now, I can't undo the past.

My dad sensed that something was changing, but he was at a loss as to what to do about us. He tried, though, in the only way he knew how, the only way his father knew. He talked about coins—it was the one topic he could discuss with ease—and continued to cook my breakfasts and dinners; but our estrangement grew worse over time. At the same time, I pulled away from the friends I'd always known. They were breaking into cliques, based primarily on what movies they were going to see or the latest shirts they bought from the mall, and I found myself on the outside looking in. Screw them, I thought. In high school, there's always a place for everyone, and I began falling in with the wrong sort of crowd, a crowd that didn't give a damn about anything,