

Appendix 01. Data Corpus of Sentences in Nicholas Sparks' *The Notebook*

No	Sentences
CHAPTER 1 MIRACLES	
1	Who am I?
2	And how, I wonder, will this story end?
3	The sun has come up and I am sitting by a window that is foggy with the breath of a life gone by.
4	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.
5	The thermostat in my room is set as high as it will go, and a smaller space heater sits directly behind me.
6	It 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.
7	Eighty years, I think sometimes, and despite my own acceptance of my age, it still amazes me that I haven't been warm since George Bush was president.
8	I wonder if this is how it is for everyone my age.
9	My life? It isn't easy to explain.
10	It has not been the rip-roaring spectacular I fancied it would be, but neither have I burrowed around with the gophers.
11	I suppose it has most resembled a blue-chip stock: fairly stable, more ups than downs, and gradually trending upward over time.
12	A good buy, a lucky Buy, and I've learned that not everyone can say this about his life.
13	But do not be misled.
14	I am nothing special; of this I am sure.
15	I am a common man with common thoughts, and I've led a common life.
16	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.
17	The romantics would call this a love story, the cynics would call it a tragedy.
18	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 and the path I've chosen to follow.
19	I have no complaints about my path and the places it has taken me; enough complaints to fill a circus tent about other things, maybe, but the path I've chosen has always been the right one, and I wouldn't have had it any other way.
20	Time, unfortunately, doesn't make it easy to stay on course.
21	The path is straight as ever, but now it is strewn with the rocks and gravel that accumulate over a lifetime.
22	Until three years ago it would have been easy to ignore, but it's impossible now.
23	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.
24	I cough, and through squinted eyes I check my watch.
25	I realize it is time to Go.

26	I stand from my seat by the window and shuffle across the room, stopping at the Desk to pick up the notebook I have read a hundred times.
27	I do not glance through it.
28	Instead I slip it beneath my arm and continue on my way to the place I must go.
29	I walk on tiled floors, white in color and speckled with gray.
30	Like my hair and the hair of most people here, though I'm the only one in the hallway this morning.
31	They are in their rooms, alone except for television, but they, like me, are used to it.
32	A person can get used to anything, if given enough time.
33	I hear the muffled sounds of crying in the distance and know exactly who is making those sounds.
34	Then the nurses see me and we smile at each other and exchange greetings.
35	They are my friends and we talk often, but I am sure they wonder about me and the things that I go through every day.
36	I listen as they begin to whisper among themselves as I pass.
37	"There he goes again, " I hear, I hope it turns out well."
38	But they say nothing directly to me about it.
39	I'm sure they think it would hurt me to talk about it so early in the morning, and knowing myself as I do, I think they're probably right.
40	A minute later, I reach the room.
41	The door has been propped open for me, as it usually is.
42	There are two others in the room, and they too smile at me as I enter.
43	"Good morning," they say with cheery voices, and I take a moment to ask about the kids and the schools and upcoming vacations.
44	We talk above the crying for a minute or so.
45	They do not seem to notice; they have become numb to it, but then again, so have I.
46	Afterward I sit in the chair that has come to be shaped like me.
47	They are finishing up now; her clothes are on, but still she is crying.
48	It will become quieter after they leave, I know.
49	The excitement of the morning always upsets her, and today is no exception.
50	Finally the shade is opened and the nurses walk out.
51	Both of them touch me and smile as they walk by.
52	I wonder what this means.
53	I sit for just a second and stare at her, but she doesn't return the look.
54	I understand, for she doesn't know who I am.
55	I'm a stranger to her.
56	Then, turning away, I bow my head and pray silently for the strength I know I will need.
57	I have always been a firm believer in God and the power of prayer, though to be honest, my faith has made for a list of questions I definitely want answered after I'm gone.
58	Ready now.
59	On go the glasses, out of my pocket comes a magnifier.
60	I put it on the table for a moment while I open the notebook.
61	It takes two licks on my gnarled finger to get the well- worn cover open to the first page.

62	Then I put the magnifier in place.
63	There is always a moment right before I begin to read the story when my mind churns, And I wonder, Will it happen today?
64	I don't know, for I never know beforehand, and deep down it really doesn't matter.
65	It's the possibility that keeps me going, not the guarantee, a sort of wager on my part.
66	And though you may call me a dreamer or fool or any other thing, I believe that anything is possible.
67	I realize the odds, and science, are against me.
68	But science is not the total answer; this I Know, this I have learned in my lifetime.
69	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.
70	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.
71	And maybe, just maybe, it will.
CHAPTER 2 GHOSTS	
72	It was early October 1946, and Noah Calhoun watched the fading sun sink lower from the wraparound porch of his plantation-style home.
73	He liked to sit here in the evenings, especially after working hard all day, and let his thoughts wander without conscious direction.
74	It was how he relaxed, a routine he'd learned from his father.
75	He especially liked to look at the trees and their reflections in the river.
76	North Carolina trees are beautiful in deep autumn: greens, yellows, reds, oranges, every shade in between.
77	Their dazzling colors glow with the sun, and for the hundredth time, Noah Calhoun wondered if the original owners of the house had spent their evenings thinking the same things.
78	The house was built in 1772, making it one of the oldest, as well as largest, homes in New Bern.
79	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.
80	The reporter from the Raleigh paper had done an article on it a few weeks ago and said it was one of the finest restorations he'd ever seen.
81	At least the house was.
82	The remaining property was another story, and that was where he'd spent most of the day.
83	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 when he had to.
84	He still had more work to do on it, especially 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 lumber delivered.
85	He'd gone into the house, drunk a glass of sweet tea, then showered.
86	He always showered at the end of the day, the water washing away both dirt and fatigue.
87	Afterward he'd combed his hair back, put on some faded jeans and a long-sleeved blue shirt, poured himself another glass of sweet tea, and gone to the porch, where he now sat, where he sat every day at this time.
88	He stretched his arms above his head, then out to the sides, rolling his shoulders as he completed the routine.

89	He felt good and clean now, fresh.
90	His muscles were tired and he knew he'd be a little sore tomorrow, but he was pleased that he had accomplished most of what he had wanted to do.
91	Noah reached for his guitar, remembering his father as he did so, thinking how much he missed him.
92	He strummed once, adjusted the tension on two strings, then strummed again.
93	This time it sounded about right, and he began to play.
94	Soft music, quiet music.
95	He hummed for a little while at first, then began to sing as night came down around him.
96	He played and sang until the sun was gone and the sky was black.
97	It was a little after seven when he quit, and he settled back into his chair and began to rock.
98	By habit, he looked upward and saw Orion and the Big Dipper, Gemini and the Pole Star, twinkling in the autumn sky.
99	He started to run the numbers in his head, then stopped.
100	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.
101	It would work out for him, he knew; it always did.
102	Besides, thinking about money usually bored him.
103	Early on, he'd learned to enjoy simple things, things that couldn't be bought, and he had a hard time understanding people who felt otherwise.
104	It was another trait he got from his father.
105	Clem, his hound dog, came up to him then and nuzzled his hand before lying down at his feet.
106	"Hey, girl, how're you doing?" he asked as he patted her head, and she whined softly, her soft round eyes peering upward.
107	A car accident had taken her leg, but she still moved well enough and kept him company on quiet nights like these.
108	He was thirty-one now, not too old, but old enough to be lonely.
109	He hadn't dated since he'd been back here, hadn't met anyone who remotely interested him.
110	It was his own fault, he knew.
111	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.
112	And sometimes in the moments right before sleep came, he wondered if he was destined to be alone forever.
113	The evening passed, staying warm, nice.
114	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.
115	Natural things gave back more than they took, and their sounds always brought him back to the way man was supposed to be.

116	There were times during the war, especially after a major engagement, when he had often thought about these simple sounds.
117	"It'll keep you from going crazy," his father had told him the day he'd shipped out.
118	"It's God's music and it'll take you home."
119	He finished his tea, went inside, found a book, then turned on the porch light on his way back out.
120	After sitting down again, he looked at the book.
121	It was old, the cover was torn, and the pages were stained with mud and water.
122	It was Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman, and he had carried it with him throughout the war.
123	It had even taken a bullet for him once.
124	He rubbed the cover, dusting it off just a little.
125	Then he let the book open randomly and read the words in front of him: This is thy hour O Soul, thy free flight into the wordless, Away from books, 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.
126	He smiled to himself.
127	For some reason Whitman always reminded him of New Bern, and he was glad he'd come back.
128	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.
129	It wasn't surprising
130	Like so many southern towns, the people who lived here never changed, they just grew a bit older.
131	His best friend these days was Gus, a seventy-year-old black man who lived down the road
132	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.
133	Now Gus would show up a couple of nights a week, usually around eight
134	With four kids and eleven grandchildren in the house, he needed to get out of the house now and then, and Noah couldn't blame him.
135	Usually Gus would bring his harmonica, and after talking for a little while, they'd play a few songs together.
136	Sometimes they played for hours.
137	He'd come to regard Gus as family.
138	There really wasn't anyone else, at least not since his father died last year.
139	He was an only child; his mother had died of influenza when he was two, and though he had wanted to at one time, he had never married.
140	But he had been in love once, that he knew.
141	Once and only once, and a long time ago.
142	And it had changed him forever.
143	Perfect love did that to a person, and this had been perfect.

144	Coastal clouds slowly began to roll across the evening sky, turning silver with the reflection of the moon.
145	As they thickened, he leaned his head back and rested it against the rocking chair.
146	His legs moved automatically, keeping a steady rhythm, and as he did most evenings, he felt his mind drifting back to a warm evening like this fourteen years ago.
147	It was just after graduation 1932, the opening night of the Neuse River Festival.
148	The town was out in full, enjoying barbecue and games of chance.
149	It was humid that night--for some reason he remembered that clearly.
150	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.
151	She was pretty, he remembered thinking, and when he finally joined them, she looked his way with a pair of hazy eyes that kept on coming.
152	"Hi," she'd said simply as she offered her hand, "Finley's told me a lot about you."
153	An ordinary beginning, something that would have been forgotten had it been anyone but her.
154	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 looking for but never find again.
155	She seemed that good, that perfect, while a summer wind blew through the trees.
156	From there, it went like a tornado wind.
157	Fin told him she was spending the summer in New Bern with her family because her father worked for R. J. Reynolds, and though he only nodded, the way she was looking at him made his silence seem okay.
158	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.
159	They met the following day, and the day after that, and they soon became inseparable.
160	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.
161	Because she was a newcomer and hadn't spent time in a small town before, they spent their days doing things that were completely new to her.
162	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.
163	They rode in canoes and watched summer thunderstorms, and to him it seemed as though they'd always known each other
164	But he learned things as well.
165	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.
166	He walked her home afterward, 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.
167	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.

168	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
169	When she left three weeks later, she took a piece of him and the rest of summer with her.
170	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 bag.
171	He spent the next week alone on Harkers Island.
172	Noah ran his hands through his hair and checked his watch.
173	Eight-twelve.
174	He got up and walked to the front of the house and looked up the road.
175	Gus wasn't in sight, and Noah figured he wouldn't be coming.
176	He went back to his rocker and sat again.
177	He remembered talking to Gus about her.
178	The first time he mentioned her,
179	Gus started to shake his head and laugh
180	"So that's the ghost you been running from."
181	I been watchin' you, workin' day and night, slavin' so hard you barely have time to catch your breath.
182	People do that for three reasons.
183	Either they crazy, or stupid, or tryin' to forget.
184	And with you, I knew you was tryin' to forget.
185	I just didn't know what."
186	He thought about what Gus had said.
187	Gus was right, of course.
188	New Bern was haunted now.
189	Haunted by the ghost of her memory.
190	He saw her in Fort Totten Park, their place, every time he walked by.
191	Either sitting on the bench or standing by the gate, always smiling, blond hair softly touching her shoulders, her eyes the color of emeralds
192	When he sat on the porch at night with his guitar, he saw her beside him, listening quietly as he played the music of his childhood.
193	He felt the same when he went to Gaston's Drug Store, or to the Masonic theater, or even when he strolled downtown.
194	Everywhere he looked, he saw her image, saw things that brought her back to life.
195	It was odd, he knew that.
196	He had grown up in New Bern.
197	Spent his first seventeen years here.
198	But when he thought about New Bern, he seemed to remember only the last summer, the summer they were together.
199	Other memories were simply fragments, pieces here and there of growing up, and few, if any, evoked any feeling.
200	He had told Gus about it one night, and not only had Gus understood, but he had been the first to explain why.

201	He said simply, "My daddy used to tell me that the first time you fall in love, it changes your life forever, and no matter how hard you try, the feelin' never goes away.
202	This girl you been tellin' me about was your first love.
203	And no matter what you do, she'll stay with you forever."
204	Noah shook his head, and when her image began to fade, he returned to Whitman.
205	He read for an hour, looking up every now and then to see raccoons and possums scurrying near the creek.
206	At nine-thirty he closed the book, went upstairs to the bedroom, and wrote in his journal, including both personal observations and the work he'd accomplished on the house.
207	Forty minutes later, he was sleeping.
208	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.
209	Earlier that evening and a hundred miles away, she sat alone on the porch swing of her parents' home, one leg crossed beneath her.
210	The seat had been slightly damp when she sat down; rain had fallen earlier, hard and stinging, but the clouds were fading now and she looked past them, toward the stars, wondering if she'd made the right decision.
211	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 opportunity slip away.
212	Lon didn't know the real reason she left the following morning.
213	The week before, she'd hinted to him that she might want to visit some antique shops near the coast.
214	"It's just a couple of days," she said, "and besides, I need a break from planning the wedding."
215	She felt bad about the lie but knew there was no way she could tell him the truth.
216	Her leaving had nothing to do with him, and it wouldn't be fair of her to ask him to understand.
217	It was an easy drive from Raleigh, slightly more than two hours, and she arrived a little before eleven.
218	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.
219	She had a quick lunch, asked the waitress for directions to the nearest antique stores, then spent the next few hours shopping.
220	By four-thirty she was back in her room.
221	She sat on the edge of the bed, picked up the phone, and called Lon.
222	He couldn't speak long, he was due in court, but before they hung up she gave him the phone number where she was staying and promised to call the following day.
223	Good, she thought while hanging up the phone.
224	Routine conversation, nothing out of the ordinary.
225	Nothing to make him suspicious.
226	She'd known him almost four years now; it was 1942 when they met, the world at war and America one year in.
227	Everyone was doing their part, and she was volunteering at the hospital downtown.

228	She was both needed and appreciated there, but it was more difficult than she'd expected.
229	The first waves of wounded young soldiers were coming home, and she spent her days with broken men and shattered bodies.
230	When Lon, with all his easy charm, introduced himself at Christmas party, she saw in him exactly what she needed: someone with confidence about the future and a sense of humor that drove all her fears away.
231	He was handsome, intelligent, and driven, a successful lawyer eight years older than she, and he pursued his job with passion, not only win-began to shave her legs.
232	As she did, she thought about her parents and what they would think of her behavior.
233	No doubt they would disapprove, especially her mother.
234	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.
235	She soaked a while longer in the tub before finally getting out and toweling off.
236	She went to the closet and looked for a dress, finally choosing a long yellow one that dipped slightly in the front, the kind of dress that was common in the South.
237	She slipped it on and looked in the mirror, turning from side to side.
238	It fit her well and made her look feminine, but she eventually decided against it and put it back on the hanger.
239	Instead she found a more casual, less revealing dress and put that on.
240	Light blue with a touch of lace, it buttoned up 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.
241	She wore little makeup, just a touch of eye shadow and mascara to accent her eyes.
242	Perfume next, not too much.
243	She found a pair of small-hoped earrings, put those on, then slipped on the tan, low-heeled sandals she had been wearing earlier.
244	She brushed her blond hair, pinned it up, and looked in the mirror.
245	No, it was too much, she thought, and she let it back down.
246	Better.
247	When she was finished, she stepped back and evaluated herself.
248	She looked good: not too dressy, not too casual.
249	She didn't want to overdo it.
250	After all, she didn't know what to expect.
251	It had been a long time--probably too long--and many different things could have happened, even things she didn't want to consider.
252	She looked down and saw her hands were shaking, and she laughed to herself.
253	It was strange; she wasn't normally this nervous.
254	Like Lon, she had always been confident, even as a child.
255	She remembered that it had been a problem at times, especially when she dated, because it had intimidated most of the boys her age.
256	She found her pocketbook and car keys, then picked up the room key.
257	She turned it over in her hand a couple of times, thinking, you've come this far, don't give up now, and almost left then, but instead sat on the bed again.
258	She checked her watch.

259	Almost six o'clock.
260	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.
261	"Damn," she whispered, "what am I doing here? I shouldn't be here.
262	There's no reason for it," but once she said it, she knew it wasn't true.
263	There was something here.
264	If nothing else, she would have her answer.
265	She opened her pocketbook and thumbed through it until she came to a folded-up piece of newspaper.
266	After taking it out slowly, almost reverently, being careful not to rip it, she unfolded it and stared at it for a while.
267	"This is why," she finally said to herself, "this is what it's all about."
268	Noah got up at five and kayaked for an hour up Brices Creek, as he usually did.
269	When he finished, he changed into his work clothes, warmed some biscuits from the day before, grabbed a couple of apples, and washed his breakfast down with two cups of coffee.
270	He worked on the fencing again, repairing most of the posts that needed it.
271	It was Indian summer, the temperature over eighty degrees, and by lunchtime he was hot and tired and glad for the break.
272	He ate at the creek because the mullets were jumping.
273	He liked to watch them jump three or four times and glide through the air before vanishing into the brackish water.
274	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.
275	Sometimes he wondered if man's instincts had changed in that time and always concluded that they hadn't.
276	At least in the basic, most primal ways.
277	As far as he could tell, man had always been aggressive, always striving to dominate, trying to control the world and everything in it.
278	The war in Europe and Japan proved that.
279	He quit working a little after three and walked to a small shed that sat near his dock.
280	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.
281	Fishing always made him reflect on his life, and he did it now.
282	After his mother died, he could remember spending his days in a dozen different homes, and for one reason or another, he stuttered badly as a child and was teased for it.
283	He began to speak less and less, and by the age of five, he wouldn't speak at all.
284	When he started classes, his teachers thought he was retarded and recommended that he be pulled out of school.
285	Instead, his father took matters into his own hands.
286	He kept him in school and afterward made him come to the lumberyard, where he worked, to haul and stack wood.

287	"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."
288	During their time talk about birds and together, his father would animals or tell stories and legends common to North Carolina.
289	Within a few months Noah was speaking again, though not well, and his father decided to teach him to read with books of poetry.
290	"Learn to read this aloud and you'll be able to say anything you want to.
291	"Learn to read this aloud and you'll be able to say anything you want to.
292	But he continued to go to the lumberyard every day simply because his father was there, and in the evenings, he would read the works of Whitman and Tennyson aloud as his father rocked beside him.
293	He had been reading poetry ever since.
294	When he got a little older, he spent most of his weekends and vacations alone.
295	He explored the Croatan Forest in his first canoe, following Brices Creek for twenty miles until he could go no farther, then hiked the remaining miles to the coast.
296	Camping and exploring became his passion, and he spent hours in the forest, sitting beneath blackjack oak trees, whistling quietly, and playing his guitar for beavers and geese and wild blue herons.
297	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.
298	Although he was quiet, years of heavy lifting at the lumberyard helped him excel in sports, and his athletic success led to popularity.
299	He enjoyed the football games and track meets, and though most of his teammates spent their free time together as well, he rarely joined them.
300	An occasional person found him arrogant; most simply figured he had grown up a bit faster than everyone else.
301	He had a few girlfriends in school, but none had ever made an impression on him.
302	Except for one.
303	And she came after graduation. Allie. His Allie.
304	He remembered talking to Fin about Allie after they'd left the festival that first night, and Fin had laughed.
305	Then he'd made two predictions: first, that they would fall in love, and second, that it wouldn't work out.
306	There was a slight tug at his line and Noah hoped for a largemouth bass, but the tugging eventually stopped, and after reeling his line in and checking the bait, he cast again.
307	Fin ended up being right on both counts.
308	Most of the summer, she had to make excuses to her parents whenever they wanted to see each other.
309	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.
310	"! don't care what my parents think, I love you and always will," she would say.
311	"We'll find a way to be together."
312	But in the end, they couldn't.

313	By early September the tobacco had been harvested and she had no choice but to return with her family to Winston-Salem.
314	"Only the summer is over, Allie, not us," he'd said the morning she left.
315	"We'll never be over."
316	But they were.
317	For a reason he didn't fully understand, the letters he wrote went unanswered.
318	Eventually he decided to leave New Bern to help get her off his mind, but also because the Depression made earning a living in New Bern almost impossible.
319	He went first to Norfolk and worked at a shipyard for six months before he was laid off, then moved to New Jersey because he'd heard the economy wasn't so bad there.
320	He eventually found a job in a scrap yard, separating scrap metal from everything else.
321	The owner, a Jewish man named Morris Goldman, was intent on collecting as much scrap metal as he could, convinced that a war was going to start in Europe and that America would be dragged in again.
322	Noah, though, didn't care about the reason.
323	He was just happy to have a job.
324	His years in the lumberyard had toughened him to this type of labor, and he worked hard.
325	Not only did it help him keep his mind off Allie during the day, but it was something he felt he had to do.
326	His daddy had always said: "Give a day's work for a day's pay.
327	Anything less is stealing."
328	That attitude pleased his boss.
329	"It's a shame you aren't Jewish," Goldman would say, "you're such a fine boy in so many other ways."
330	It was the best compliment Goldman could give.
331	He continued to think about Allie, especially at night.
332	He wrote her once a month but never received a reply.
333	Eventually he wrote a 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.
334	Still, though, she stayed with him.
335	Three years after the last letter, he went to Winston-Salem in the hope of finding her.
336	He went to her house, discovered that she had moved, and after talking to some neighbors, finally called RJR.
337	The girl who answered the phone was new and didn't recognize the name, but she poked around the personnel files for him.
338	She found out that Allie's father had left the company and that no forwarding address was listed.
339	That trip was the first and last time he ever looked for her.
340	For the next eight years, he worked for Goldman.
341	At first, he was one of twelve employees, but as the years dragged on, the company grew, and he was promoted.
342	By 1940 he had mastered the business and was running the entire operation, brokering the deals and managing a staff of thirty.
343	The yard had become the largest scrap metal dealer on the East Coast.

344	During that time, he dated a few different women.
345	He became serious with one, a waitress from the local diner with deep blue eyes and silky black hair.
346	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.
347	But neither did he forget her.
348	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, where to linger, the things to whisper.
349	They would sometimes spend an entire day in bed, holding each other and making the kind of love that fully satisfied both of them.
350	She had known they wouldn't be together forever.
351	Toward 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.
352	There's a part of you that you keep closed off from everyone, including me.
353	It's as if I'm not the one you're really with.
354	Your mind is on someone else."
355	He tried to deny it, but she didn't believe him.
356	"I'm a woman--I know these things.
357	When you look at me sometimes, I know you're seeing someone else.
358	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.
359	He understood.
360	They parted as friends, and the following year he received a postcard from her saying she was married.
361	He hadn't heard from her since.
362	While he was in New Jersey, he would visit his father once a year around Christmas.
363	They'd spend some time fishing and talking, and once in a while they'd take a trip to the coast to go camping on the Outer Banks near Ocracoke.
364	In December 1941, when he was twenty-six, the war began, just as Goldman had predicted.
365	Noah walked into his office the following month and informed Goldman of his intent to enlist, then returned to New Bern to say good-bye to his father.
366	Five weeks later he found himself in boot camp.
367	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 ever sold.
368	"I couldn't have done it without you," the letter said.
369	"You're the finest young man who ever worked for me, even if you aren't Jewish."
370	He spent his next three years with Patton's Third Army, tramping through deserts in North Africa and forests in Europe with thirty pounds on his back, his infantry unit never far from action.
371	He watched his friends die around him; watched as some of them were buried thousands of miles from home.

372	Once, while hiding in a foxhole near the Rhine, he imagined he saw Allie watching over him.
373	He remembered the war ending in Europe, then a few months later in Japan.
374	Just before he was discharged, he received a letter from a lawyer in New Jersey representing Morris Goldman.
375	Upon meeting the lawyer, he found out that Goldman had died a year earlier and his estate liquidated.
376	The business had been sold, and Noah was given a check for almost seventy thousand dollars.
377	For some reason he was oddly unexcited about it.
378	The following week he returned to New Bern and bought the house.
379	He remembered bringing his father around later, showing him what he was going to do, pointing out the changes he intended to make.
380	His father seemed weak as he walked around, coughing and wheezing.
381	Noah was concerned, but his father told him not to worry, assuring him that he had the flu.
382	Less than one month later his father died of pneumonia and was buried next to his wife in the local cemetery.
383	Noah tried to stop by regularly to leave some flowers; occasionally he left a note.
384	And every night without fail he took a moment to remember him, then said a prayer for the man who'd taught him everything that mattered.
385	After reeling in the line, he put the gear away and went back to the house.
386	His neighbor, Martha Shaw, was there to thank him, bringing three loaves of homemade bread and some biscuits in appreciation for what he'd done.
387	Her husband had been killed in the war, leaving her with three children and a tired shack of a house to raise them in.
388	Winter was coming, 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.
389	Hopefully, it would be enough to get them through.
390	Once she'd left, he got in 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.
391	He always stopped there when he was going to the store because Gus's family didn't have a car.
392	One of the daughters hopped up and rode with him, and they did their shopping at Capers General Store.
393	When he got home, he didn't unpack the groceries right away.
394	Instead he showered, found a Budweiser and a book by Dylan Thomas, and went to sit on the porch.
395	She still had trouble believing it, even as she held the proof in her hands.
396	It had been in the newspaper at her parents' house three Sundays ago.
397	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.

398	"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.
399	"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.
400	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 with the same expression her father had just moments before.
401	"Are you okay?" her mother asked over her coffee cup.
402	"You look a little pale."
403	She didn't answer right away, she couldn't, and it was then that she'd noticed her hands were shaking.
404	That had been when it started.
405	"And here it will end, one way or the other," she whispered again.
406	She refolded the scrap of paper and put it back, remembering that she had left her parents' home later that day with the paper so she could cut out the article.
407	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.
408	And now, after three weeks of long walks alone, after three weeks of distraction, it was the reason she'd come.
409	When asked, she said her erratic behavior was due to stress.
410	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. She took a deep breath and stood again.
411	The wedding plans were stressful to everyone involved.
412	Almost five hundred people were invited, including the governor, one senator, and the ambassador to Peru.
413	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.
414	Occasionally she felt like running away with Lon to get married without the fuss.
415	But she knew he wouldn't agree; like the aspiring politician he was, he loved being the center of attention.
416	She took a deep breath and stood again.
417	"It's now or never," she whispered, then picked up her things and went to the door.
418	She paused only slightly before opening it and going downstairs.
419	The manager smiled as she walked by, and she could feel his eyes on her as she left and went to her car.
420	She slipped behind the wheel, looked at herself one last time, then started the engine and turned right onto Front Street.
421	She wasn't surprised that she still knew her way around town so well.
422	Even though she hadn't been here in years, it wasn't large and she navigated the streets easily.
423	Even though she hadn't been here in years, it wasn't large and she navigated the streets easily.
424	It was beautiful here in the low country, as it always had been.

425	Unlike the Piedmont area where she grew up, the land was flat, but it had the same salty, fertile soil that was ideal for cotton and tobacco.
426	Those two crops and timber kept the towns alive in this part of the state, and as she drove along the road outside town, she saw the beauty that had first attracted people to this region.
427	To her, it hadn't changed at all.
428	Broken sunlight passed through water oaks and hickory trees a hundred feet tall, illuminating the colors of fall.
429	On her left, a river the color of iron veered toward the road and then turned away before giving up its life to a different, larger river another mile ahead.
430	The gravel road itself 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.
431	The constancy of the place brought back a flood of memories, and she felt her insides tighten as one by one she recognized landmarks she'd long since forgotten.
432	The sun hung just above the trees on her left, and as she rounded a curve, she passed an old church, abandoned for years but still standing.
433	She had explored it that summer, looking for souvenirs from the War between the States, and as her car passed by, the memories of that day became stronger, as if they'd just happened yesterday.
434	A majestic oak tree on the banks of the river came into view next, and the memories became more intense.
435	It looked the same as it had back then, branches low and thick, stretching horizontally along the ground with Spanish moss draped over the limbs like a veil.
436	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.
437	And it had been at that moment that she'd first fallen in love.
438	He was two years older than she was, and as she drove along this roadway-in-time, he slowly came into focus once again.
439	He always looked older than he really was, she remembered thinking.
440	His appearance was that of someone slightly weathered, almost like a farmer coming home after hours in the field.
441	He had the callused hands and broad shoulders that came to those who worked hard for a living, and the first faint lines were beginning to form around the dark eyes that seemed to read her every thought.
442	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.
443	He had read to her that day; read to her as they lay in the grass beneath the tree with an accent that was soft and fluent, almost musical in quality.
444	It was the kind of voice that belonged on radio, and it seemed to hang in the air when he read to her.
445	She remembered closing her eyes, listening closely, and letting the words he was reading touch her soul: It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.
446	I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun...
447	He thumbed through old books with dog-eared pages, books he'd read a hundred times.

448	He'd read for a while, then stop, and the two of them would talk
449	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
450	And the way he said it made her believe him, and she knew then how much he meant to her.
451	Occasionally, when she asked, he would talk about himself or explain why he had chosen a particular poem and what he thought of it, and at other times he just studied her in that intense way of his.
452	They watched the sun go down and ate together under the stars.
453	It was getting late by then, and she knew her parents would be furious if they knew where she was.
454	At that moment, though, it really didn't matter to her.
455	All she could think about was how special the day had been, how special he was, and as they started toward her house a few minutes later, he took her hand in his and she felt the way it warmed her the whole way back.
456	Another turn in the road and she finally saw it in the distance.
457	The house had changed dramatically from what she remembered.
458	She slowed the car as she approached, turning into the long, tree-lined dirt drive that led to the beacon that had summoned her from Raleigh.
459	She drove slowly, looking toward the house, and took a deep breath when she saw him on the porch, watching her car.
460	He was dressed casually.
461	From a distance, he looked the same as he had back then.
462	For a moment, when the light from the sun was behind him, he almost seemed to vanish into the scenery.
463	Her car continued forward, rolling slowly, then finally stopped beneath an oak tree that shaded the front of the house.
464	She turned the key, never taking her eyes from him, and the engine sputtered to a halt.
465	He stepped off the porch and began to approach her, walking easily, then suddenly stopped cold as she emerged from the car.
466	For a long time, all they could do was stare at each other without moving.
467	Allison Nelson, twenty-nine years old and engaged, a socialite, searching for answers she needed to know, and Noah Calhoun, the dreamer, thirty-one, visited by the ghost that had come to dominate his life.
CHAPTER 3 REUNION	
468	Neither one of them moved as they faced each other.
469	He hadn't said anything, his muscles seemed frozen, and for a second, she thought he didn't recognize her.
470	Suddenly she felt guilty about showing up this way, without warning, and this made it harder.
471	She had thought it would be easier somehow, that she would know what to say.
472	But she didn't.
473	Everything that came into her head seemed inappropriate, somehow lacking.
474	Thoughts of the summer they'd shared came back to her, and as she stared at him, she noticed how little he'd changed since she'd last seen him.
475	He looked good, she thought.

476	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.
477	He was tan, 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.
478	When she was finally ready, she took a deep breath and smiled.
479	"Hello, Noah. It's good to see you again."
480	Her comment startled him, and he looked at her with amazement in his eyes.
481	Then, after shaking his head slightly, he slowly began to smile.
482	"You too ", the stammered.
483	He brought his hand to his chin, and she noticed he hadn't shaved.
484	"It's really you, isn't it? I can't believe it.
485	She heard the shock in his voice as he spoke, and surprising her, it all came together--being here, seeing him.
486	She felt something twitch inside, something deep and old, something that made her dizzy for just a second.
487	She caught herself fighting for control.
488	She hadn't expected this to happen, didn't want it to happen.
489	She was engaged now.
490	She hadn't come here for this.., yet... Yet... Yet the feeling went on despite herself, and for a brief moment she felt fifteen again.
491	Felt as she hadn't in years, as if all her dreams could still come true. Felt as though she'd finally come home.
492	Felt as though she'd finally come home.
493	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.
494	They held each other tightly, making it real, both of them letting the fourteen years of separation dissolve in the deepening twilight.
495	They stayed like that for a long time before she finally pulled back to look at him.
496	Up close, she could see the changes she hadn't noticed at first.
497	He was a man now, and his face had lost the softness of youth.
498	The faint lines around his eyes had deepened, and there was a scar on his chin that hadn't been there before.
499	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 since she'd seen him last.
500	Her eyes brimmed with tears as they finally released each other.
501	She laughed nervously under her breath while wiping the tears from the corners of her eyes.
502	"Are you okay?" he asked, a thousand other questions on his face.
503	"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to cry".
504	"It's okay," he said, smiling, "I still can't believe it's you.
505	How did you find me?"
506	She stepped back, trying to compose herself, wiping away the last of her tears.

507	"I saw the story on the house in the Raleigh paper a couple of weeks ago, and I had to come see you again."
508	Noah smiled broadly.
509	"I'm glad you did."
510	He stepped back just a bit.
511	"God, you look fantastic.
512	You're even prettier now than you were then."
513	She felt the blood in her face.
514	Just like fourteen years ago.
515	"Thank you. You look great, too."
516	And he did, no doubt about it.
517	The years had treated him well.
518	"So what have you been up to?"
519	Why are you here?"
520	His questions brought her back to the present, making her realize what could happen if she wasn't careful.
521	Don't let this get out of hand, she told herself; the longer it goes on, the harder it's going to be.
522	And she didn't want it to get any harder.
523	But God, those eyes.
524	Those soft, dark eyes.
525	She turned away and took a deep breath, wondering how to say it, and when she finally started, her voice was quiet.
526	"Noah, before you get the wrong idea, I did want to see you again, but there's more to it than just that."
527	She paused for a second.
528	"I came here for a reason.
529	There's something I have to tell you."
530	"What is it?"
531	She looked away and didn't answer for a moment, surprised that she couldn't tell him just yet.
532	In the silence, Noah felt a sinking feeling in his stomach.
533	Whatever it was, was bad.
534	"I don't know how to say it.
535	I thought I did at first, but now I'm not so sure"
536	The air was suddenly rattled by the sharp cry of a raccoon, and Clem came out from under the porch, barking gruffly.
537	Both of them turned at the commotion, and Allie was glad for the distraction.
538	"Is he yours?" she asked.
539	Noah nodded, feeling the tightness in his stomach.
540	"Actually, it's a she"
541	Clementine's her name.
542	But yeah, she's all mine."

543	They both watched as Clem shook her head, stretched, then wandered toward the sounds.
544	Allie's eyes widened just a bit when she saw her limp away.
545	"What happened to her leg?" she asked, stalling for time.
546	"Hit by a car a few months back.
547	Doc Harrison, the vet, called me to see if I wanted her because her owner didn't anymore.
548	After I saw what had happened, I guess I just couldn't let her be put down."
549	You were always nice like that," she said, trying to relax.
550	She paused, then looked past him toward the house.
551	"You did a Wonderful job restoring it.
552	It looks perfect, just like I knew it would someday.
553	He turned his head in the same direction as hers while he wondered about the small talk and what she was holding back.
554	"Thanks, that's nice of you.
555	It was quite a project, though.
556	I don't know if I would do it again."
557	"Of course, you would," she said.
558	She knew exactly how he felt about this place.
559	But then, she knew how he felt about everything--or at least she had a long time ago.
560	And with that thought, she realized how much had changed since then.
561	They were strangers now; she could tell by looking at him.
562	Could tell that fourteen years apart was a long time.
563	Too long.
564	"What is it, Allie?" He turned to her, compelling her to look, but she continued to stare at the house.
565	"I'm being rather silly, aren't I?"
566	she asked, trying to smile.
567	"What do you mean?"
568	"This whole thing. Showing up out of the blue, not knowing what I want to say.
569	You must think I'm crazy."
570	"You're not crazy," he said gently.
571	He reached for her hand, and she let him hold it as they stood next to one another.
572	He went on: "Even though I don't know why, I can see this is hard for you.
573	Why don't we go for a walk?"
574	"Like we used to?"
575	"Why not? I think we both could use one."
576	She hesitated and looked to his front door.
577	"Do you need to tell anyone??"
578	He shook his head.
579	"No, there's no one to tell. It's just me and Clem."
580	Even though she'd asked, she had suspected there wouldn't be anyone else, and inside she didn't know how to feel about that.
581	But it did make what she wanted to say a little harder.

582	It would have been easier if there was someone else.
583	They started toward the river and turned on a path near the bank.
584	She let go of his hand, surprising him, and walked on with just enough distance between them so that they couldn't accidentally touch.
585	He looked at her.
586	She was pretty still, with thick hair and soft eyes, and she moved so gracefully that it almost seemed as though she were gliding.
587	He'd seen beautiful women before, though, women who caught his eye, but to his mind they usually lacked the traits he found most desirable.
588	Traits like intelligence, confidence, strength of spirit, passion, traits that inspired others to greatness, traits he aspired to himself.
589	Allie had those traits, he knew, and as they walked now, he sensed them once again lingering beneath the surface.
590	"A living poem" had always been the words that came to mind when he tried to describe her to others.
591	"How long have you been back here?"
592	she asked as the path gave way to a small grass hill.
593	"Since last December.
594	I worked up north for a while, then spent the last three years in Europe."
595	She looked to him with questions in her eyes.
596	"The war?" He nodded and she went on.
597	"I thought you might be there. I'm glad you made it out okay."
598	"Me too," he said.
599	"Are you glad to be back home?"
600	"Yeah. My roots are here."
601	This is where I'm supposed to be."
602	He paused.
603	"But what about you?"
604	He asked the question softly, suspecting the worst.
605	It was a long moment before she answered.
606	"I'm engaged."
607	He looked down when she said it, suddenly feeling just a bit weaker.
608	So that was it.
609	That's what she needed to tell him.
610	"Congratulations," he finally said, wondering how convincing he sounded.
611	"When's the big day?"
612	"Three weeks from Saturday.
613	Lon wanted a November wedding."
614	"Lon?"
615	"Lon Hammond Jr. My fiancé."
616	He nodded, not surprised.

617	The Hammonds were one of the most powerful and influential families in the state.
618	Cotton money.
619	Unlike that of his own father, the death of Lon Hammond Sr. had made the front page of the newspaper.
620	"I've heard of them.
621	His father built quite a business.
622	Did Lon take over for him?"
623	She shook her head.
624	"No, he's a lawyer.
625	He has his own practice downtown."
626	"With his name, he must be busy."
627	"He is.
628	He works a lot."
629	He thought he heard something in her tone, and the next question came automatically.
630	"Does he treat you well?"
631	She didn't answer right away, as if she were considering the question for the first time.
632	Then: "Yes. He's a good man, Noah.
633	You would like him."
634	Her voice was distant when she answered, or at least he thought it was.
635	Noah wondered if it was just his mind playing tricks on him.
636	"How's your daddy doing?" she asked.
637	Noah took a couple of steps before answering.
638	"He passed on earlier this year, right after I got back."
639	"I'm sorry," she said softly, knowing how much he had meant to Noah.
640	He nodded, and the two walked in silence for a moment.
641	They reached the top of the hill and stopped.
642	The oak tree was in the distance, with the sun glowing orange behind it.
643	Allie could feel his eyes on her as she stared in that direction.
644	"A lot of memories there, Allie."
645	She smiled.
646	"I know.
647	I saw it when I came in.
648	Do you remember the day we spent there?"
649	"Yes," he answered, volunteering no more.
650	"Do you ever think about it?" "Sometimes," he said.
651	"Usually when I'm working out this way.
652	It sits on my property now."
653	"You bought it?"
654	"I just couldn't bear to see it turned into kitchen cabinets.?"
655	She laughed under her breath, feeling strangely pleased about that.
656	"Do you still read poetry?"

657	He nodded.
658	"Yeah. I never stopped.
659	I guess it's in my blood."
660	"Do you know, you're the only poet I've ever met."
661	"I'm no poet.
662	I read, but I can't write a verse.
663	I've tried."
664	"You're still a poet, Noah Taylor Calhoun."
665	Her voice softened.
666	"I still think about it a lot.
667	It was the first time anyone ever read poetry to me before.
668	In fact, it's the only time."
669	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.
670	As the sun dropped a little lower and the sky turned orange, he asked:"So, how long are you staying?"
671	"I don't know.
672	Not long. Maybe until tomorrow or the next day."
673	"Is your fiancé here on business?"
674	She shook her head.
675	"No, he's still in Raleigh."
676	Noah raised his eyebrows.
677	"Does he know you're here?" She shook her head again and answered slowly.
678	"No. I told him I was looking for antiques.
679	He wouldn't understand my coming here."
680	Noah was a little surprised by her answer.
681	It was one thing to come and visit, but it was an entirely different matter to hide the truth from her fiancé.
682	"You didn't have to come here to tell me you were engaged.
683	You could have written me instead, or even called."
684	"I know.
685	But for some reason, I had to do it in person." "Why?"
686	She hesitated.
687	"I don't know . . .," she said, trailing off, and the way she said it made him believe her.
688	"I don't know . . .," she said, trailing off, and the way she said it made him believe her.
689	The gravel crunched beneath their feet as they walked in silence for a few steps.
690	Then he asked: "Allie, do you love him?"
691	She answered automatically. "Yes, I love him."
692	The words hurt.
693	But again, he thought he heard something in her tone, as if she were saying it to convince herself.

694	He stopped and gently took her shoulders in his hands, making her face him.
695	The fading sunlight reflected in her eyes as he spoke.
696	"If you're happy, Allie, and you love him, I won't try to stop you from going back to him.
697	But if there's a part of you that isn't sure, then don't do it.
698	This isn't the kind of thing you go into hallway.
699	"Her answer came almost too quickly.
700	"I'm making the right decision, Noah."
701	He stared for a second, wondering if he believed her.
702	Then he nodded and the two began to walk again.
703	After a moment he said: "I'm not making this easy for you, am I?"
704	She smiled a little.
705	"It's okay.
706	I really can't blame you."
707	"I'm sorry anyway."
708	"Don't be. There's no reason to be sorry.
709	I'm the one who should be apologizing.
710	Maybe I should have written."
711	He shook his head
712	"To be honest, I'm still glad you came.
713	Despite everything. It's good to see you again."
714	"Thank you, Noah."
715	"Do you think it would be possible to start over?"
716	She looked at him curiously
717	"You were the best friend I ever had, Allie.
718	I'd still like to be friends, even if you are engaged, and even if it is just for a couple of days.
719	How about we just kind of get to know each other again?"
720	She thought about it, thought about staying or leaving, and decided that since he knew about her engagement, it would probably be all right.
721	Or at least not wrong.
722	She smiled slightly and nodded.
723	"I'd like that."
724	"Good. How about dinner?"
725	I know a place that serves the best crab in town."
726	"Sounds great. Where?"
727	"My house. I've had the traps out all week, and I saw that I had some good ones caged a couple days ago.
728	Do you mind?"
729	"No, that sounds fine."
730	He smiled and pointed over his shoulder with his thumb.
731	"Great. They're at the dock.
732	I'll just be a couple of minutes."

733	Allie watched him walk away and noticed the tension she'd felt when telling him about her engagement was beginning to fade.
734	Closing her eyes, she ran her hands through her hair and let the light breeze fan her cheek.
735	She took a deep breath and held it for a moment, feeling the muscles in her shoulders further relax as she exhaled.
736	Finally, opening her eyes, she stared at the beauty that surrounded her.
737	She always loved evenings like this, evenings where the faint aroma of autumn leaves rode on the backs of soft southern winds.
738	She loved the trees and the sounds they made.
739	Listening to them helped her relax even more.
740	After a moment, she turned toward Noah and looked at him almost as a stranger might.
741	God, he looked good.
742	Even after all this time.
743	She watched him as he reached for a rope that hung in the water.
744	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.
745	He let it hang over the river for a moment and shook it, letting most of the water escape.
746	After setting the trap on the dock, he opened it and began to remove the crabs one by one, placing them into a bucket.
747	She started walking toward him then, listening to the crickets' chirp, and remembered a lesson from childhood.
748	She counted the number of chirps in a minute and added twenty-nine. Sixty-seven degrees, she thought as she smiled to herself.
749	She didn't know if it was accurate, but it felt about right.
750	As she walked, she looked around and realized she had forgotten how fresh and beautiful everything seemed here.
751	Over her shoulder, she saw the house in the distance.
752	He had left a couple of lights on, and it seemed to be the only house around.
753	At least the only one with electricity.
754	Out here, outside the town limits, nothing was certain.
755	Thousands of country homes still lacked the luxury of indoor lighting.
756	She stepped on the dock and it creaked under her foot.
757	The sound reminded her of a rusty squeeze-box, and Noah glanced up and winked, then went back to checking the crabs, making sure they were the right size.
758	She walked to the rocker that sat on the dock and touched it, running her hand along the back.
759	She could picture him sitting in it, fishing, thinking, reading.
760	It was old and weather-beaten, rough feeling.
761	She wondered how much time he spent here alone, and she wondered about his thoughts at times like those.
762	"It was my daddy's chair," he said, not looking up, and she nodded.
763	She saw bats in the sky, and frogs had joined the crickets in their evening harmony.
764	She walked to the other side of the dock, feeling a sense of closure.

765	A compulsion had driven her here, and for the first time in three weeks the feeling was gone.
766	She'd somehow needed Noah to know about her engagement, to understand, to accept it--she was sure of that now--and while thinking of him, she was reminded of something they'd shared from the summer they were together.
767	With head down, she paced around slowly, looking for it until she found it--the carving.
768	Noah loves Allie, in a heart
769	Carved into the dock a few days before she'd left.
770	A breeze broke the stillness and chilled her, making her cross her arms.
771	She stood that way, alternately looking down at the carving and then toward the river, until she heard him reach her side.
772	She could feel his closeness, his warmth, as she spoke.
773	"It's so peaceful here," she 'said, her voice dreamlike.
774	"I know.
775	I come down here a lot now just to be close to the water.
776	It makes me feel good."
777	"I would, too, if I were you."
778	"Come on, let's go.
779	The mosquitoes are getting vicious, and I'm starved."
780	The sky had turned black, and Noah started toward the house, Allie right beside him.
781	In the silence her mind wandered, and she felt a little light-headed as she walked along the path.
782	She wondered what he was thinking about her being here and wasn't exactly sure if she knew herself.
783	When they reached the house a couple of minutes later, Clem greeted them with a wet nose in the wrong place.
784	Noah motioned her away, and she left with her tail between her legs
785	He pointed to her car.
786	"Did you leave anything in there that you need to get out?"
787	"No, I got in earlier and unpacked already."
788	Her voice sounded different to her, as if the years had suddenly been undone.
789	"Good enough," he said as he reached the back porch and started up the steps.
790	He set the bucket by the door, then led the way inside, heading toward the kitchen.
791	The cabinets had been done in oak, as was the floor, and the windows were large and faced east, allowing the light from morning sun.
792	The cabinets had been done in oak, as was the floor, and the windows were large and faced east, allowing the light from morning sun.
793	It was a tasteful restoration, not overdone as was common when homes like this were rebuilt.
794	"Do you mind if I look around?"
795	"No, go ahead.
796	I did some shopping earlier, and I still have to put the groceries away."

797	Their eyes met for a second, and Allie knew as she turned that he continued to watch her as she left the room.
798	Inside she felt that little twitch again.
799	She toured the house for the next few minutes, walking through the rooms, noticing how wonderful it looked.
800	By the time she'd finished, it was hard to remember how run-down it had been.
801	She came down the stairs, turned toward the kitchen, and saw his profile.
802	For a second, he looked like a young man of seventeen again, and it made her pause a split second before going on.
803	Damn, she thought, get a hold of yourself.
804	Remember that you're engaged now.
805	He was standing by the counter, a couple of cabinet doors open wide, empty grocery bags on the floor, whistling quietly.
806	He smiled at her before putting a few more cans into one of the cabinets.
807	She stopped a few feet from him and leaned against the counter, one leg over the other.
808	She shook her head, amazed at how much he had done.
809	"It's unbelievable, Noah.
810	How long did the restoration take?"
811	He looked up from the last bag he was unpacking
812	"Almost a year."
813	"Did you do it yourself?"
814	He laughed under his breath.
815	"No. I always thought I would when I was young, and I started that way.
816	But it was just too much.
817	It would have taken years, and so I ended up hiring some people..., actually a lot of people.
818	But even with them, it was still a lot of work, and most of the time I didn't stop until past midnight."
819	"Why'd you work so hard?" Ghosts, he wanted to say, but didn't.
820	"I don't know.
821	Just wanted to finish, I guess. Do you want anything to drink before I start dinner?"
822	"What do you have?"
823	"Not much, really. Beer, tea, coffee."
824	"Tea sounds good."
825	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.
826	He pulled out a couple of teabags and set them by the stove, then filled the teapot.
827	After putting it on the burner, he lit a match, and she heard the sound of flames as they came to life.
828	"It'll be just a minute," he said.
829	"This stove heats up pretty quick."
830	"That's fine."
831	When the teapot whistled, he poured two cups and handed one to her.

832	She smiled and took a sip, then motioned toward the window.
833	"I bet the kitchen is beautiful when the morning light shines in."
834	He nodded.
835	"It is.
836	I had larger windows put in on this side of the house for just that reason.
837	Even in the bedrooms upstairs."
838	"I'm sure your guests enjoy that.
839	Unless of course they want to sleep late."
840	"Actually, I haven't had any guests stay over yet
841	Since my daddy passed on, I don't really know who to invite."
842	By his tone, she knew he was just making conversation.
843	Yet for some reason it made Her feel.., lonely.
844	He seemed to realize how she was feeling, but before she could dwell on it, he changed the subject.
845	"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.
846	He went to the cupboard and removed a large pot with a steamer and lid.
847	He brought the pot to the sink, added water, then carried it to the stove
848	"Can I give you a hand with something?"
849	He answered over his shoulder.
850	"Sure. How about cutting up some vegetables for the fryer.
851	There's plenty in the icebox, and you can find a bowl over there."
852	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.
853	She carried it to the icebox and found some okra, zucchini, onions, and carrots on the bottom shelf.
854	Noah joined her in front of the open door, and she moved to make room for him.
855	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.
856	He removed a beer and a bottle of hot sauce, then returned to the stove.
857	Noah opened the beer and poured it in the water, then added the hot sauce and some other seasoning as well.
858	After stirring the water to make sure the powders were dissolved, he went to the back door to get the crabs.
859	He paused for a moment before going back inside and stared at Allie, watching her cut the carrots.
860	As he did that, he wondered again why she had come, especially now that she was engaged.
861	None of this seemed to make much sense to him.
862	But then, Allie had always been surprising.
863	He smiled to himself, remembering back to the way she had been.

864	Fiery, spontaneous, passion-ate--as he imagined most artists to be.
865	And she was definitely that.
866	Artistic talent like hers was a gift.
867	He remembered seeing some paintings in the museums in New York and thinking that her work was just as good as what he had seen there
868	She had given him a painting before she'd left that summer.
869	It hung above the fireplace in the living room.
870	She'd called it a picture of her dreams, and to him it had seemed extremely sensual.
871	When he looked at it, and he often did late in the evening, he could see desire in the colors and the lines, and if he focused carefully, he could imagine what she had been thinking with every stroke.
872	A dog barked in the distance, and Noah realized he had been standing with the door open a long time.
873	He quickly closed it, turning back to the kitchen.
874	And as he walked, he wondered if she had noticed how long he'd been gone.
875	"How's it going?" he asked, seeing she was almost finished.
876	"Good. I'm almost done here.
877	Anything else for dinner?"
878	"I have some homemade bread that I was planning on."
879	"Homemade?"
880	"From a neighbor," he said as he put the pail in the sink.
881	"From a neighbor," he said as he put the pail in the sink.
882	Allie picked up her cup and came over to watch him.
883	"Aren't you afraid they'll pinch you when you grab them?"
884	"No. Just grab 'em like this," he said, demonstrating, and she smiled.
885	"I forget you've done this your whole life."
886	"New Bern's small, but it does teach you how to do the things that matter."
887	She leaned against the counter, standing close to him, and emptied her cup.
888	When the crabs were ready, he put them in the pot on the stove.
889	He washed his hands, turning to speak to her as he did so.
890	"You want to sit on the porch for a few minutes? I'd like to let 'em soak for a half hour."
891	"Sure," she said.
892	He wiped his hands, and together they went to the back porch.
893	Noah flipped on the light as they went outside, and he sat in the older rocker, offering the newer one to her.
894	When he saw her cup was empty, he went inside for a moment and emerged with another cup of tea and a beer for himself.
895	He held out the cup and she took it, sipping again before she set it on the table beside the chairs.
896	"You were sitting out here when I came, weren't you?"

897	He answered as he made himself comfortable.
898	"Yeah. I sit out here every night. It's a habit HOW."
899	"I can see why," she said as she looked around.
900	"So, what is it you do these days?"
901	"Actually, I don't do anything but work on the house right now.
902	It satisfies my creative urges."
903	"How can you... I mean..."
904	"Morris Goldman."
905	"Excuse me?"
906	He smiled.
907	"My old boss from up north.
908	His name was Morris Goldman.
909	He offered me a part of the business just as I enlisted and died before I got home.
910	When I got back to the States, his lawyers gave me a check big enough to buy this place and fix it up."
911	She laughed under her breath.
912	"You always told me you'd find a way to do it."
913	They both sat quietly for a moment, thinking back again.
914	Allie took another sip of tea.
915	"Do you remember sneaking over here the night you first told me about this place?"
916	He nodded, and she went on: "I got home a little late that evening, and my parents were furious when I finally came in.
917	I can still picture my daddy standing in the living room smoking a cigarette, my mother on the sofa staring straight ahead.
918	I swear, they looked as if a family member had died.
919	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.
920	She said to me, 'I'm sure you think that I don't understand what you're going through, but I do.
921	It's just that sometimes, our future is dictated by what we are, as opposed to what we want.'
922	I remember being really hurt when she said that."
923	"You told me about it the next day.
924	It hurt my feelings, too.
925	I liked your parents, and I had no idea they didn't like me."
926	"It wasn't that they didn't like you.
927	They didn't think you deserved me."
928	"There's not much difference."
929	There was a sadness in his voice when he responded, and she knew he 'was right to feel that way.

930	She looked toward the stars while she ran her hand through her hair, pulling back the strands that had fallen onto her face.
931	"I know that.
932	I always did.
933	Maybe that's why my mother and I always seem to have a distance between us when we talk."
934	"How do you feel about it now?"
935	"The same as I did back then.
936	That it's wrong, that it isn't fair.
937	It was a terrible thing for a girl to learn.
938	That status is more important than feelings."
939	Noah smiled softly at her answer but said nothing.
940	"I've thought about you ever since that summer," she said.
941	"You have?"
942	"Why wouldn't you think so?"
943	She seemed genuinely surprised.
944	"You never answered my letters."
945	"You wrote?"
946	"Dozens of letters.
947	I wrote you for two years without receiving a single reply."
948	She slowly shook her head before lowering her eyes.
949	"I didn't know... ," she finally said, quietly, and he knew it must have been her mother, checking the mail, removing the letters without her knowledge.
950	It was what he had always suspected, and he watched as Allie came to the same realization.
951	"It was wrong of her to do that, Noah, and I'm sorry she did.
952	But try to understand.
953	Once I left, she probably thought it would be easier for me to just let it go.
954	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
955	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."
956	"That wasn't her decision to make," he said quietly.
957	"I know."
958	"Would it have made a difference even if you'd got them?"
959	"Of course. I always wondered what you were up to?"
960	"No, I mean with us.
961	Do you think we would have made it?"
962	It took a moment for her to answer.
963	"I don't know, Noah.
964	I really don't, and you don't either.

965	We're not the same people we were then.
966	We've changed, we've grown.
967	Both of us.”
968	She paused.
969	He didn't respond, and in the silence, she looked toward the creek.
970	She went on: "But yes, Noah, I think we would have.
971	At least, I'd like to think we would have.”
972	He nodded, looked down, then turned away.
973	"What's Lon like.”
974	She hesitated, not expecting the question.
975	Bringing up Lon's name brought slight feelings of guilt to the surface, and for a moment she didn't know how to answer.
976	She reached for her cup, took another sip of tea, and listened as a woodpecker tapped in the distance.
977	She spoke quietly.
978	"Lon's handsome, charming, and successful, and most of my friends are insanely jealous.
979	They think he's perfect, and in a lot of ways he is.
980	He's kind to me, he makes me laugh, and I know he loves me in his own way.”
981	She paused for a moment, collecting her thoughts.
982	"But there's always going to be something missing in our relationship.”
983	She surprised herself with her answer but knew it was true nonetheless
984	And she also knew by looking at him that Noah had suspected the answer in advance.
985	"Why?”
986	She smiled weakly and shrugged as she answered.
987	Her voice was barely above a whisper.
988	"I guess I still look for the kind of love we had that summer.”
989	Noah thought about what she had said for a long while, thinking about the relationships he'd had since he'd last seen her.
990	"How about you?" she asked.
991	"Did you ever think about us?”
992	"All the time. I still do.”
993	"Are you seeing anyone?”
994	"No," he answered, shaking his head.
995	Both of them seemed to think about that, trying but finding it impossible to displace from their minds
996	Noah finished his beer, surprised that he had emptied it so quickly.
997	"I'm going to go start the water.
998	Can I get you anything?”

999	She shook her head, and Noah went to the kitchen and put the crabs in the steamer and the bread in the oven.
1000	He found some flour and cornstarch for the vegetables, coated them, and put some grease into the frying pan.
1001	After turning the heat on low, he set a timer and pulled another beer from the icebox before heading back to the porch.
1002	And while he was doing those things, he thought about Allie and the love that was missing from both their lives.
1003	Allie, too, was thinking.
1004	About Noah, about herself, about a lot of things
1005	For a moment she wished she weren't engaged but then quickly cursed herself
1006	It wasn't Noah she loved; she loved what they once had been.
1007	Besides, it was normal to feel this way.
1008	Her first real love, the only man she'd ever been with--how could she expect to forget him?
1009	Yet was it normal for her insides to twitch whenever he came near?
1010	Was it normal to confess things she could never tell anyone else?
1011	Was it normal to come here three weeks from her wedding day?
1012	"No, it's not," she finally whispered to herself as she looked to the evening sky.
1013	"There's nothing normal about any of this."
1014	Noah came out at that moment and she smiled at him, glad he'd come back so she didn't have to think about it anymore.
1015	"It's going to take a few minutes," he said as he sat back down.
1016	"That's fine.
1017	"I'm not that hungry yet."
1018	He looked at her then, and she saw the softness in his eyes.
1019	"I'm glad you came, Allie," he said.
1020	"Me too. I almost didn't, though."
1021	"Why did you come?"
1022	I was compelled, she wanted to say, but didn't.
1023	"Just to see you, to find out what you've been up to.
1024	To see how you are."
1025	He wondered if that was all but didn't question further.
1026	Instead he changed the subject.
1027	"By the way, I've been meaning to ask, do you still paint?"
1028	She shook her head. "Not anymore."
1029	He was stunned.
1030	"Why not? You have so much talent."
1031	"I don't know"
1032	"Sure, you do.
1033	You stopped for a reason

1034	"He was right.
1035	She'd had a reason.
1036	"It's a long story."
1037	"I've got all night," he answered.
1038	"Did you really think I was talented?" she asked quietly.
1039	"C'mon," he said, reaching for her hand, "I want to show you something."
1040	She got up and followed him through the door to the living room.
1041	He stopped in front of the fireplace and pointed to the painting that hung above the mantel.
1042	She gasped, surprised she hadn't noticed it earlier, more surprised it was here at all.
1043	"You kept it?"
1044	"Of course, I kept it.
1045	It's wonderful."
1046	She gave him a skeptical look, and he explained
1047	"It makes me feel alive when I look at it.
1048	Sometimes I have to get up and touch it.
1049	It's just so real--the shapes, the shadows, the colors.
1050	I even dream about it sometimes.
1051	It's incredible, Allie--I can stare at it for hours."
1052	"You're serious," she said, shocked.
1053	"As serious as I've ever been."
1054	She didn't say anything.
1055	"You mean to tell me no one has ever told you that before?" "
1056	My professor did," she finally said, "but I guess I didn't believe him."
1057	He knew there was more.
1058	Allie looked away before continuing.
1059	"I've been drawing and painting since I was a child.
1060	I guess that once I got a little older, I began to think I was good at it.
1061	I enjoyed it, too.
1062	I remember working on this painting that summer, adding to it every day, changing it as our relationship changed.
1063	I don't even remember how it started or what I wanted it to be, but somehow it evolved into this.
1064	"I remember being unable to stop painting after I went home that summer.
1065	I think it was my way of avoiding the pain I was going through.
1066	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 enjoying every minute.
1067	I loved the freedom I felt when I created, the way it made me feel inside to make something beautiful
1068	Just before I graduated, my professor, who happened to also be the critic for the paper, told me I had a lot of talent.

1069	He told me I should try my luck as an artist.
1070	But I didn't listen to him.”
1071	She stopped there, gathering her thoughts.
1072	"My parents didn't think it was proper for someone like me to paint for a living.
1073	I just stopped after a while.
1074	I haven't touched a brush in years.”
1075	She stared at the painting.
1076	"Do you think you'll ever paint again?"
1077	"I'm not sure if I can anymore.
1078	It's been a long time.”
1079	"You can still do it, Allie.
1080	I know you can.
1081	You have a talent that comes from inside you, from your heart, not from your fingers.
1082	What you have can't ever go away.
1083	It's what other people only dream about.
1084	You're an artist, Allie.”
1085	The words were spoken with such sincerity that she knew he wasn't saying it just to be nice.
1086	He truly believed in her ability, and for some reason that meant more to her than she expected.
1087	But something else happened then, something even more powerful.
1088	Why it happened, she never knew, but this was when the chasm began to close for Allie, the chasm she had erected in her life to separate the pain from the pleasure.
1089	And she suspected then, maybe not consciously, that there was more to this than even she cared to admit.
1090	But at that moment she still wasn't completely aware of it, and she turned to face him.
1091	She reached over and touched his hand, hesitantly, gently, amazed that after all these years he'd somehow known exactly what she'd needed to hear.
1092	When their eyes locked, she once again realized how special he was.
1093	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
1094	The timer went off in the kitchen, a small ding, and Noah turned away, breaking the moment, strangely affected by what had just happened between them.
1095	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.
1096	He silently cursed the timer as he walked to the kitchen and removed the bread from the oven.
1097	He almost burned his fingers, dropped the loaf on the counter, and saw that the frying pan was ready.
1098	He added the vegetables and heard them begin to crackle.

1099	Then, muttering to himself, he got some butter out of the icebox, spread some on the bread, and melted a bit more for the crabs.
1100	Allie had followed him into the kitchen and cleared her throat.
1101	"Can I get the table ready?"
1102	Noah used the bread knife as a pointer.
1103	"Sure, plates are over there.
1104	Utensils and napkins there.
1105	Make sure you get plenty-- crabs can be messy, so we'll need them."
1106	He couldn't look at her as he spoke.
1107	He didn't want to realize he'd been mistaken about what had just happened between them.
1108	He didn't want it to be a mistake.
1109	Allie, too, was wondering about the moment and feeling warm as she thought of it.
1110	The words he'd spoken replayed in her head as she found everything she needed for the table: plates, place settings, salt and pepper.
1111	Noah handed her the bread as she was finishing the table, and their fingers touched briefly.
1112	He turned his attention back to the frying pan and turned the vegetables.
1113	He lifted the lid of the steamer, saw the crabs still had a minute, and let them cook some more.
1114	He was more composed now and returned to small talk, easy conversation.
1115	"Have you ever had crab before?"
1116	"A couple of times. But only in salads."
1117	He laughed.
1118	"Then you're in for an adventure.
1119	Hold on a second."
1120	He disappeared upstairs for a moment, then returned with a navy-blue button-down shirt.
1121	He held it open for her.
1122	"Here, put this on.
1123	I don't want you to stain your dress."
1124	Allie put it on and smelled the fragrance that lingered in the shirt--his smell, distinctive, natural.
1125	"Don't worry," he said, seeing her expression, "it's clean."
1126	She laughed.
1127	"I know.
1128	It just reminds me of our first real date.
1129	You gave me your jacket that night, remember?"
1130	He nodded.
1131	"Yeah, I remember.
1132	Fin and Sarah were with us.
1133	Fin kept elbowing me the whole way back to your parents' house, trying to get me to hold your hand."
1134	"You didn't, though."

1135	"No," he answered, shaking his head.
1136	"Why not?"
1137	"Shy, maybe, or afraid.
1138	I don't know.
1139	It just didn't seem like the right thing to do at the time."
1140	"Come to think of it, you were kind of shy, weren't you?"
1141	"I prefer the words 'quiet confidence,'" he answered with a wink, and she smiled.
1142	The vegetables and crabs were ready about the same time.
1143	"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.
1144	Then, realizing the tea was still on the counter, Allie stood and brought it over.
1145	After putting some vegetables and bread on their plates, Noah added a crab, and Allie sat for a moment, staring at it
1146	"It looks like a bug."
1147	"A good bug, though," he said.
1148	"Here, let me show you how it's done."
1149	He demonstrated quickly, making it look easy, removing the meat and putting it on her plate.
1150	Allie crushed the legs too hard the first time and the time after that, and had to use her fingers to get the shells away from the meat.
1151	She felt clumsy at first, worrying that he saw every mistake, but then she realized her own insecurity.
1152	He didn't care about things like that.
1153	He never had.
1154	"So, whatever happened to Fin?" she asked.
1155	It took a second for him to answer.
1156	"Fin died in the war.
1157	His destroyer was torpedoed in forty-three."
1158	"I'm sorry," she said.
1159	"I know he was a good friend of yours."
1160	His voice changed, a little deeper now.
1161	"He was.
1162	I think of him a lot these days.
1163	I especially remember the last time I saw him.
1164	I'd come home to say good-bye before I enlisted, and we ran into each other again.
1165	He was a banker here, like his daddy was, and he and I spent a lot of time together over the next week.
1166	Sometimes I think I talked him into joining.
1167	I don't think he would have, except that I was going to."
1168	"That's not fair," she said, sorry she'd brought up the subject.
1169	"You're right.

1170	I just miss him, is all.”
1171	"I liked him, too.
1172	He made me laugh.”
1173	"He was always good at that.”
1174	She looked at him slyly.
1175	"He had a crush on me, you know.”
1176	"I know. He told me about it.”
1177	"He did? What did he say?”
1178	Noah shrugged.
1179	"The usual for him.
1180	That he had to fight you off with a stick.
1181	That you chased him constantly, that sort of thing.”
1182	She laughed quietly.
1183	"Did you believe him?”
1184	"Of course," he answered, "why wouldn't I?"
1185	"You men always stick together," she said as she reached across the table, poking his arm with her finger.
1186	She went on.
1187	"So, tell me everything you've been up to since I saw you last.”
1188	They started to talk then, making up for lost time.
1189	Noah talked about leaving New Bern, about working in the shipyard and at the scrap yard in New Jersey.
1190	He spoke fondly of Morris Goldman and touched on the war a little, avoiding most of the details, and told her about his father and how much he missed him.
1191	Allie talked about going to college, painting, and her hours spent volunteering at the hospital.
1192	She talked about her family and friends and the charities she was involved with.
1193	Neither of them brought up anybody they had dated since they'd last seen each other.
1194	Even Lon was ignored, and though both of them noticed the omission, neither mentioned it.
1195	Afterward Allie tried to remember the last time she and Lon had talked this way.
1196	Although he listened well and they seldom argued, he was not the type of man to talk like this.
1197	Like her father, he wasn't comfortable sharing his thoughts and feelings.
1198	She'd tried to explain that she needed to be closer to him, but it had never seemed to make a difference.
1199	But sitting here now, she realized what she'd been missing.
1200	The sky grew darker and the moon rose higher as the evening wore on.
1201	And without either of them being conscious of it, they began to regain the intimacy, the bond of familiarity, they had once shared.
1202	They finished dinner, both pleased with the meal, neither talking much now.

1203	Noah looked at his watch and saw that it was getting late.
1204	The stars were out in full, the crickets a little quieter.
1205	He had enjoyed talking to Allie and wondered if he'd talked too much, wondered what she'd thought about his life, hoping it would somehow make a difference, if it could.
1206	Noah got up and refilled the teapot.
1207	They both brought the dishes to the sink and cleaned up the table, and he poured two more cups of hot water, adding teabags to both.
1208	"How about the porch again?" he asked, handing her the cup, and she agreed, leading the way.
1209	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.
1210	Noah watched her from the corner of his eye.
1211	God, she's beautiful, he thought.
1212	And inside, he ached.
1213	For something had happened during dinner.
1214	Quite simply, he had fallen in love again.
1215	He knew that now as they sat next to one another.
1216	Fallen in love with a new Allie, not just her memory.
1217	But then, he had never really stopped, and this, he realized, was his destiny.
1218	"It's been quite a night," he said, his voice softer now.
1219	"Yes, it has," she said, "a wonderful night."
1220	Noah turned to the stars, their twinkling lights reminding him that she would be leaving soon, and he felt almost empty inside.
1221	This was a night he wanted never to end.
1222	How should he tell her?
1223	What could he say that would make her stay?
1224	He didn't know.
1225	And thus, the decision was made to say nothing.
1226	And he realized then that he had failed.
1227	The rockers moved in quiet rhythm.
1228	Bats again, over the river.
1229	Moths kissing the porch light.
1230	Somewhere, he knew, there were people making love.
1231	"Talk to me," she finally said, her voice sensual.
1232	Or was his mind playing tricks
1233	"What should I say?"
1234	"Talk like you did to me under the oak tree."
1235	And he did, reciting distant passages, toasting the night
1236	Whitman and Thomas, because he loved the images.
1237	Tennyson and Browning, because their themes felt so familiar.

1238	She rested her head against the back of the rocker, closing her eyes, growing just a bit warmer by the time he'd finished.
1239	It wasn't just the poems or his voice that did it.
1240	It was all of it, the whole greater than the sum of the parts.
1241	She didn't try to break it down, didn't want to, because it wasn't meant to be listened to that way.
1242	Poetry, she thought, wasn't written to be analyzed; it was meant to inspire without reason, to touch without understanding.
1243	Because of him, she'd gone to a few poetry readings offered by the English department while in college.
1244	She'd sat and listened to different people, different poems, but had stopped soon after, discouraged that no one inspired her or seemed as inspired as true lovers of poetry should be.
1245	They rocked for a while, drinking tea, sitting quietly, drifting in their thoughts.
1246	The compulsion that had driven her here was gone now--she was glad for 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.
1247	She'd tried to deny them, hide from them, but now she realized that she didn't want them to stop.
1248	It had been years since she'd felt this way.
1249	Lon could not evoke these feelings in her.
1250	He never had and probably never would.
1251	Maybe that was why she had never been to bed with him.
1252	He had tried before, many times, using everything from flowers to guilt, and she had always used the excuse that she wanted to wait until marriage.
1253	He took it well, usually, and she sometimes wondered how hurt he would be if he ever found out about Noah.
1254	But there was something else that made her want to wait, and it had to do with Lon himself.
1255	He was driven in his work, and it always commanded most of his attention.
1256	Work came first, and for him there was no time for poems and wasted evenings and rocking on porches.
1257	She knew this was why he was successful, and part of her respected him for that.
1258	But she also sensed it wasn't enough.
1259	She wanted something else, something different, something more.
1260	Passion and romance, perhaps, or maybe quiet conversations in candlelit rooms, or perhaps something as simple as not being second.
1261	Noah, too, was sifting through his thoughts.
1262	To him, the evening would be remembered as one of the most special times he had ever had.
1263	As he rocked, he remembered it all in detail, then remembered it again.

1264	Everything she had done seemed somehow electric to him, charged.
1265	Now, sitting beside her, he wondered if she'd ever dreamed the same things, he had in the years they'd been apart.
1266	Had she ever dreamed of them holding each other again and kissing in soft moonlight?
1267	He looked to the stars and remembered the thousands of empty nights he had spent since they'd last seen each other.
1268	Or did she go further and dream of their naked bodies, which had been kept separate for far too long....
1269	Seeing her again brought all those feelings to the surface, and he found it impossible to press them back down.
1270	He knew then he wanted to make love to her again and to have her love in return
1271	It was what he needed most in the world.
1272	But he also realized it could never be.
1273	Now that she was engaged.
1274	Allie knew by his silence that he was thinking about her and found that she reveled in it.
1275	She didn't know what his thoughts were exactly, didn't care really, just knew they were about her and that was enough.
1276	She thought about their conversation at dinner and wondered about loneliness.
1277	For some reason she couldn't picture him reading poetry to someone else or even sharing his dreams with another woman.
1278	He didn't seem the type.
1279	Either that, or she didn't want to believe it.
1280	She put down the tea, then ran her hands through her hair, closing her eyes as she did so.
1281	"Are you tired?" he asked, finally breaking free from his thoughts.
1282	"A little. I should really be going in a couple of minutes."
1283	"I know," he said, nodding, his tone neutral.
1284	She didn't get up right away.
1285	Instead she picked up the cup and drank the last swallow of tea, feeling it warm her throat.
1286	She took the evening in. Moon higher now, wind in the trees, temperature dropping.
1287	She looked at Noah next.
1288	The scar on his face was visible from the side.
1289	She wondered if it had happened during the war, then wondered if he'd ever been wounded at all.
1290	He hadn't mentioned it and she hadn't asked, mostly because she didn't want to imagine him being hurt.
1291	"I should go," she finally said, handing the quilt back to him.
1292	Noah nodded, then stood without a word.

1293	He carried the quilt, and the two of them walked to her car while fallen leaves crunched beneath their feet.
1294	She started to take off the shirt he'd loaned her as he opened the door, but he stopped her.
1295	"Keep it," he said.
1296	"I want you to have it.
1297	" She didn't ask why, because she wanted to keep it, too.
1298	She readjusted it and crossed her arms afterward to ward off the chill.
1299	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.
1300	"I had a great time tonight," he said.
1301	"Thank you for finding me."
1302	"I did, too," she answered.
1303	He summoned his courage.
1304	"Will I see you tomorrow?"
1305	A simple question.
1306	She knew what the answer should be, especially if she wanted to keep her life simple.
1307	"I don't think we should," was all she had to say, and it would end right here and now.
1308	But for a second, she didn't say anything.
1309	The demon of choice confronted her then, teased her, challenged her.
1310	Why couldn't she say it? She didn't know.
1311	But 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.
1312	"I'd like that."
1313	Noah was surprised.
1314	He hadn't expected her to answer this way.
1315	He wanted to touch her then, to take her in his arms, but he didn't.
1316	"Can you be here about noon?"
1317	"Sure. What do you want to do?"
1318	"You'll see," he answered.
1319	"I know just the place to go."
1320	"Have I ever been there before?"
1321	"No, but it's a special place."
1322	"Where is it?"
1323	"It's a surprise?"
1324	"Will I like it?"
1325	"You'll love it," he said.
1326	She turned away before he could attempt a kiss.
1327	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.
1328	She couldn't handle that right now, with everything going through her head
1329	She slid behind the wheel, breathing a sigh of relief.

1330	He shut the door for her, and she started the engine.
1331	As the car idled, she rolled down the window just a bit.
1332	"See you tomorrow," she said, her eyes reflecting the moonlight.
1333	Noah waved as she backed the car out. She turned it around, then drove up the lane, heading toward town.
1334	He watched the car until the lights vanished behind far-off oak trees and the engine noise was gone.
1335	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 anymore.
1336	After he looked up the road one last time, they returned to the back-porch side by side.
1337	He sat in the rocker again, this time alone, trying once again to fathom the evening that had just passed.
1338	Thinking about it.
1339	Replaying it.
1340	Seeing it again.
1341	Hearing it again.
1342	Running it by in slow motion.
1343	He didn't feel like playing his guitar now, didn't feel like reading.
1344	Didn't know what he felt.
1345	"She's engaged," he finally whispered, and then was silent for hours, his rocker making the only noise.
1346	The night was quiet now, with little activity except for Clem, who visited him occasionally, checking on him as if to ask "Are you all right?"
1347	And sometime after midnight on that clear October evening, it all rushed inward and Noah was overcome with longing.
1348	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.
1349	Someone bent over in his rocker with his face in his hands and tears in his eyes.
1350	He didn't know how to stop them.
CHAPTER 4 PHONE CALLS	
1351	Lon hung up the phone. He had called at seven, then at eight-thirty, and now he checked his watch again.
1352	Nine forty-five. Where was she?
1353	He knew she was where she had said she would be because he had spoken to the manager earlier.
1354	Yes, she had checked in and he had last seen her around six.
1355	Going to dinner, he thought.
1356	No, he hadn't seen her since.
1357	Lon shook his head and leaned back in his chair.
1358	He was the last one in the office, as usual, and everything was quiet.

1359	But that was normal with an ongoing trial, even if the trial was going well.
1360	Law was his passion, and the late hours alone gave him the opportunity to catch up on his work without interruption.
1361	He knew he would win the case because he mastered the law and charmed the jury.
1362	He always did, and losses were infrequent now.
1363	Part of it came from being able to select the cases he had the expertise to win. He had reached that level in his practice.
1364	Only a select few in the city had that kind of stature, and his earnings reflected that.
1365	But the more important part of his success came from hard work.
1366	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.
1367	Little things, obscure things, and it had become a habit now.
1368	Whether it was a matter of law or presentation, he was diligent in his study, and it had won him a few cases early in his career when he should have lost.
1369	And now, a little detail bothered him.
1370	Not about the case. No, that was fine.
1371	It was something else.
1372	Something about Allie. But damn, he couldn't put his finger on it
1373	He was fine when she'd left this morning.
1374	At least he thought he was.
1375	But sometime after her call, maybe an hour or so, something clicked in his mind.
1376	The little detail. Detail. Something insignificant?
1377	Something important? Think... think... Damn, what was it?
1378	His mind clicked
1379	Something... something., something said?
1380	Something had been said?
1381	Yes, that was it.
1382	He knew it.
1383	But what was it?
1384	Had Allie said anything on the phone?
1385	That had been when it started, and he ran through the conversation again.
1386	No, nothing out of the ordinary.
1387	But that was it, he was sure now.
1388	What had she said? Her trip was good, she had checked in, had done some shopping.
1389	Left her number.
1390	That's about all.
1391	He thought about her then.
1392	He loved her, he was sure of that.
1393	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.

1394	She would listen to him, laugh at the right moments, and had a sixth sense about what he needed to hear.
1395	But more than that, he admired the way she'd always spoken her mind.
1396	He remembered that after they'd gone out a few times, he'd said to her what he said to all women he dated--that he wasn't ready for a steady relationship.
1397	Unlike the others, though, Allie had simply nodded and said, "Fine."
1398	But on her way out the door, she'd turned and said: "But your problem isn't me, or your job, or your freedom, or whatever else you think it is.
1399	Your problem is that you're alone.
1400	Your father made the Hammond name famous, and you've probably been compared to him all your life.
1401	You've never been your own person.
1402	A life like that makes you empty inside, and you're looking for someone who will magically fill that void.
1403	But no one can do that but you."
1404	The words had stayed with him that night and rung true the following morning.
1405	He'd called again, asked for a second chance, and after some persistence, she'd reluctantly agreed.
1406	In the four years they'd dated, she'd become everything he ever wanted, and he knew he should spend more time with her.
1407	But practicing law made limiting his hours impossible.
1408	She'd always understood, but still, he cursed himself for not making the time.
1409	Once he was married, he'd shorten his hours, he promised himself.
1410	He'd have his secretary check his schedule to make sure he wasn't overextending himself Check? ...
1411	And his mind clicked another notch.
1412	Check... checking..., checking in?
1413	He looked to the ceiling.
1414	Checking in?
1415	Yes, that was it.
1416	He closed his 'eyes and thought for a second.
1417	No. Nothing. What, then? C'mon, don't fail now.
1418	Think, damn it, think. New Bern.
1419	The thought popped into his head just then.
1420	Yes, New Bern. That was it.
1421	The little detail, or part of it. What else, though?
1422	New Bern, he thought again, and knew the name.
1423	Knew the town a little, mainly from a few trials he had been in.
1424	Stopped there a few times on the way to the coast.
1425	Nothing special. He and Allie had never been there together.

1426	But Allie had been there before And the rack tightened its grip, another part coming together.
1427	Another part..., but there was more Allie, New Bern... and..., and..., something at a party. A comment in passing.
1428	From Allie's mother. He'd hardly noticed it.
1429	But what had she said?
1430	And Lon paled then, remembering.
1431	Remembering what had been said so long ago.
1432	Remembering what Allie's mother had said.
1433	It was something about Allie being in love one time with a young man from New Bern.
1434	Called it puppy love.
1435	So, what, he had thought when he'd heard it, and had turned to smile at Allie.
1436	But she hadn't smiled.
1437	She was angry.
1438	And then Lon guessed that she had loved that person far more deeply than her mother had suggested.
1439	Maybe even more deeply than she loved him.
1440	And now she was there. Interesting.
1441	Lon brought his palms together, as though he were praying, resting them against his lips.
1442	Coincidence? Could be nothing.
1443	Could be exactly what she said.
1444	Could be stress and antique shopping. Possible. Even probable. Yet... yet..., what if?
1445	Lon considered the other possibility, and for the first time in a long time, he became frightened.
1446	What if? What if she with him?
1447	He cursed the trial, wishing it were over
1448	Wishing he had gone with her.
1449	Wondering if she'd told him the truth, hoping that she had
1450	And he made up his mind then not to lose her. He would do anything it took to keep her.
1451	He would do anything it took to keep her.
1452	She was everything he'd always needed, and he'd never find another quite like her.
1453	So, with trembling hands, he dialed the phone for the fourth and last time that evening.
1454	And again, there was no answer.
CHAPTER 5 KAYAKS AND FORGOTTEN DREAMS	
1455	Allie woke early the next morning, forced by the incessant chirping of starlings, and rubbed her eyes, feeling the stiffness in her body.
1456	She hadn't slept well, waking after every dream, and she remembered seeing the hands of the clock in different positions during the night, as if verifying the passage of time.
1457	She'd slept in the soft shirt he'd given her, and she smelled him once again while thinking about the evening they'd spent together.

1458	The easy laughter and conversation came back to her, and she especially remembered the way he'd talked about her painting.
1459	It was so unexpected, yet uplifting, and as the words began to replay in her mind, she realized how sorry she would have been had she decided not to see him again.
1460	She looked out the window and watched the chattering birds search for food in early light.
1461	Noah, she knew, had always been a morning person who greeted dawn in his own way.
1462	She knew he liked to kayak or canoe, and she remembered the one morning she'd spent with him in his canoe, watching the sun come up.
1463	She'd had to sneak out 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.
1464	"Look there," he'd whispered, and she'd watched her first sunrise with her head on his shoulder, wondering if anything could be better than what was happening at that moment.
1465	And 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.
1466	She was right.
1467	Noah was up before the sun and dressed quickly, same jeans as last night, undershirt, clean flannel shirt, blue jacket, and boots.
1468	He brushed his teeth before going downstairs, drank a quick glass of milk, and grabbed two biscuits on the way out the door.
1469	After Clem greeted him with a couple of sloppy licks, he walked to the dock where his kayak was stored.
1470	He liked to let the river work its magic, loosening up his muscles, warming his body, clearing his mind.
1471	The old kayak, well used and river stained, hung on two rusty hooks attached to his dock just above the waterline to keep off the barnacles.
1472	He lifted it free from the hooks and set it at his feet, inspected it quickly, then took it to the bank.
1473	In a couple of seasoned moves long since mastered by habit, he had it in the water working its way upstream with himself as the pilot and engine.
1474	The air was cool on his skin, almost crisp, and the sky was a haze of different colors: black directly above him like a mountain peak, then blues of infinite range, becoming lighter until it met the horizon, where gray took its place.
1475	He took a few deep breaths, smelling pine trees and brackish water, and began to reflect.
1476	This had been part of what he'd missed most when he had lived up north.
1477	Because of the long hours at work, there had been little time to spend on the water.
1478	Camping, hiking, paddling on rivers, dating, working . . . something had to go.
1479	For the most part he'd been able to explore New Jersey's countryside on foot whenever he'd had extra time, but in fourteen years he hadn't canoed or kayaked once.
1480	It had been one of the first things he'd done when he returned.

1481	There's something special, almost mystical, about spending dawn on the water, he thought to himself, and he did it almost every day now.
1482	Sunny and clear or cold and bitter, it never mattered as he paddled in rhythm to music in his head, working above water the color of iron.
1483	He saw a family of turtles resting on a partially submerged log and watched as a heron broke for flight, skimming just above the water before vanishing into the silver twilight that preceded sunrise.
1484	He paddled out to the middle of the creek, where he watched the orange glow begin to stretch across the water.
1485	He stopped paddling hard, giving just enough effort to keep him in place, staring until light began to break through the trees.
1486	He always liked to pause at day-break--there was a moment when the view was spectacular, as if the world were being born again.
1487	Afterward he began to paddle hard, working off the tension, preparing for the day.
1488	While he did that, questions danced in his mind like water drops in a frying pan.
1489	He wondered about Lon and what type of man he was, wondered about their relationship.
1490	Most of all, though, he wondered about Allie and why she had come.
1491	By the time he reached home, he felt renewed.
1492	Checking his watch, he was surprised to find that it had taken two hours.
1493	Time always played tricks out there, though, and he'd stopped questioning it months ago.
1494	He hung the kayak to dry, stretched for a couple of minutes, and went to the shed where he stored his canoe.
1495	He carried it to the bank, leaving it a few feet from the water, and as he turned toward the house, he a little stiff.
1496	The morning haze he knew the stiffness noted that his legs were still hadn't burned off yet, and in his legs usually predicted rain.
1497	He looked to the western sky and saw storm clouds, thick and heavy, far off but definitely present.
1498	The winds weren't blowing hard, but they were bringing the clouds closer.
1499	From the looks of them, he didn't want to be outside when they got here.
1500	Damn. How much time did he have? A few hours, maybe more. Maybe less.
1501	He showered, put on new jeans, a red shirt, and black cowboy boots, brushed his hair, and went downstairs to the kitchen.
1502	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.
1503	Steady, but it would start dropping soon.
1504	The western sky promised that.
1505	He'd learned long ago to never underestimate the weather, and he wondered if it was a good idea to go out.
1506	The rain he could deal with; lightning was a different story.
1507	Especially if he was on the water.

1508	canoe was no place to be when electricity sparked in humid air.
1509	He finished his coffee, putting off the decision until later.
1510	He went to the toolshed and found his ax.
1511	After checking the blade by pressing his thumb to it, he sharpened it with a whetstone until it was ready.
1512	"A dull ax is more dangerous than a sharp one," his daddy used to say.
1513	He spent the next twenty minutes splitting and stacking logs.
1514	He did it easily, his strokes efficient, and didn't break a sweat.
1515	He set a few logs off to the side for later and brought them inside when he was finished, putting them by the fireplace.
1516	He looked at Allie's painting again and reached out to touch it, bringing back the feelings of disbelief at seeing her again.
1517	God, what was it about her that made him feel this way?
1518	Even after all these years?
1519	What sort of power did she have over him?
1520	He finally turned away, shaking his head, and went back to the porch.
1521	He checked the barometer again.
1522	It hadn't changed.
1523	Then he looked at his watch.
1524	Allie should be here soon.
1525	Allie had finished her bath and was already dressed.
1526	Earlier she'd opened the window to check the temperature.
1527	It wasn't cold outside, and she'd decided on a cream-colored spring dress with long sleeves and a high neck.
1528	It was soft and comfortable, maybe a little snug, but it looked good, and she had selected some white sandals that matched.
1529	She spent the morning walking around down-town.
1530	The Depression had taken its toll here, but she could see the signs of prosperity beginning to work their way back.
1531	The Masonic theater, the oldest active theater in the country, looked a little more run-down but was still operating with a couple of recent movies.
1532	Fort Totten Park looked exactly the same as it had fourteen years ago, and she assumed the kids who played on the swings after school looked the same as well.
1533	She smiled at the memory then, thinking back to when things were simpler.
1534	Or at least had seemed to be.
1535	Now, it seemed, nothing was simple.
1536	It seemed so improbable, everything falling into place as it had, and she wondered what she would have been doing now, had she never seen the article in the paper.
1537	It wasn't very difficult to imagine, because her routines seldom changed.
1538	It was Wednesday, which meant bridge at the country club, then on to the Junior Women's League, where they would probably be arranging another fund-raiser for the private school or hospital.

1539	After that, a visit with her mother, then home to get ready for dinner with Lon, because he made it a point to leave work by seven.
1540	It was the one night a week she saw him regularly.
1541	She suppressed a feeling of sadness about that, hoping that one day he would change.
1542	He had often promised to and usually followed through for a few weeks before drifting back to the same schedule.
1543	"I can't tonight, honey," he would always explain.
1544	"I'm sorry, but I can't. Let me make it up to you later."
1545	She didn't like to argue with him about it, mostly because she knew he was telling the truth.
1546	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 the time with her now.
1547	She passed an art gallery, almost walked by it in her preoccupation, then turned and went back.
1548	She paused at the door for a second, surprised at how long it had been since she'd been in one.
1549	At least three years, maybe longer.
1550	Why had she avoided it?
1551	She went inside--it had opened with the rest of the shops on Front Street--and browsed among the paintings.
1552	Many of the artists were local, and there was a strong sea flavor to their works.
1553	Lots of ocean scenes, sandy beaches, pelicans, old sailing ships, tugboats, piers, and seagulls.
1554	But most of all, waves.
1555	Waves of every shape, size, and color imaginable, and after a while they all looked alike.
1556	The artists were either uninspired or lazy, she thought.
1557	On one wall though, there were a few paintings that more suited her tastes.
1558	All were by an artist she'd never heard of, Elayn, and most appeared to have been inspired by the architecture of the Greek islands.
1559	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 color, as if not completely focused.
1560	Yet the colors were vivid and swirling, drawing the eye in, almost directing what it should see next.
1561	It was dynamic, dramatic.
1562	The more she thought about it, the more she liked it, and she considered buying it before she realized that she liked it because it reminded her of her own work.
1563	She examined it more closely and thought to herself that maybe Noah was right. Maybe she should start painting again.
1564	At nine-thirty Allie left the gallery and went to Hoffman-Lane, a department store downtown.

1565	It took a few minutes to find what she was looking for, but it was there, in the school supply section.
1566	Paper, drawing chalk, and pencils, not high quality but good enough.
1567	It wasn't painting, but it was a start, and she was excited by the time she got back to her room.
1568	She sat at the desk and started working: nothing specific, just getting the feel of it again, letting shapes and colors flow from the memory of her youth.
1569	After a few minutes of abstraction, she did a rough sketch of the street scene as seen from her room, amazed at how easily it came.
1570	It was almost as if she'd never stopped.
1571	She examined it when she was finished, pleased with the effort.
1572	She wondered what to try next and finally decided.
1573	Since she didn't have a model, she visualized it in her head before starting.
1574	And though it was harder than the street scene, it came naturally and began to take form.
1575	Minutes passed quickly.
1576	She worked steadily but checked the time frequently so she wouldn't be late, and she finished it a little before noon.
1577	It had taken almost two hours, but the end result surprised her.
1578	It looked as though it had taken a great deal longer.
1579	After rolling it up, she put it in a bag and collected the rest of her things.
1580	On her way out the door, she looked at herself in the mirror, feeling oddly relaxed, not exactly sure why.
1581	Down the stairs again and out the door.
1582	As she left, she heard a voice behind her.
1583	"Miss?" She turned, knowing it was directed at her.
1584	The manager. Same man as yesterday, a Curious look on his face.
1585	"Yes???"
1586	"You had some calls last night."
1587	She was shocked.
1588	"I did?"
1589	"Yes. All from a Mr. Hammond."
1590	Oh, God. "Lon called?"
1591	"Yes, ma'am, four times.
1592	I talked to him when he called the second time.
1593	He was rather concerned about you.
1594	He said he was your fiancé"
1595	She smiled weakly, trying to hide what she was thinking.
1596	Four times? Four? What could that mean?
1597	What if something had happened back home?
1598	"Did he say anything? Is it an emergency?"
1599	He shook his head quickly.

1600	"He really didn't say, miss, but he didn't mention anything.
1601	Actually, he sounded more concerned about you, though."
1602	Good, she thought.
1603	That's good.
1604	And then, just as suddenly, a pang in her chest.
1605	Why the urgency? Why so many calls? Had she said anything yesterday?
1606	Why would he be so persistent?
1607	It was completely unlike him.
1608	Is there any way he could have found out?
1609	No... that was impossible.
1610	Unless someone saw her here yesterday and called But they would have had to follow her out to Noah's.
1611	No one would have done that.
1612	She had to call him now; no way to get around it.
1613	But she didn't want to, strangely.
1614	This was her time, and she wanted to spend it doing what she wanted.
1615	She hadn't planned on speaking to him until later, and for some reason she felt almost as if talking to him now would spoil the day.
1616	Besides, what was she going to say?
1617	How could she explain being out so late? A late dinner and then a walk? Maybe. Or a movie? Or... "Miss?"
1618	Almost noon, she thought.
1619	Where would he be?
1620	His office, probably.
1621	No. In court, she suddenly realized, and immediately felt as if she'd been released from shackles.
1622	There was no way she could talk to him, even if she wanted to.
1623	She was surprised by her feelings.
1624	She shouldn't feel this way, she knew, and yet it didn't bother her.
1625	She looked?" at her watch, acting now.
1626	"Is it really almost twelve?"
1627	The manager nodded after looking at the clock.
1628	"Yes, a quarter till, actually."
1629	"Unfortunately," she started, "he's in court right now and I can't reach him.
1630	If he does call again, could you tell him I'm shopping and that I'll try to call him later?"
1631	"Of course," he answered.
1632	She could see the question in his eyes, though: But where were you last night?
1633	He had known exactly when she'd come in.
1634	Too late for a single woman in this small town, she was sure.
1635	"Thank you," she said, smiling.
1636	"I'd appreciate it."

1637	Two minutes later she was in her car, driving to Noah's, anticipating the day, largely unconcerned about the phone calls.
1638	Yesterday she would have been, and she wondered what that meant.
1639	As she was driving over the drawbridge less than four minutes after she'd left the inn, Lon called from the courthouse.
CHAPTER 6 MOVING WATER	
1640	Noah was sitting in his rocker, drinking sweet tea, listening for the car, when he finally heard it turn up the drive.
1641	He went around front and watched the car pull up and park beneath the oak tree again.
1642	Same spot as yesterday. Clem barked a greeting at her car door, tail wagging, and he saw Allie wave from inside the car.
1643	She stepped out, patted Clem on the head while she cooed at her, then turned, smiling at Noah as he walked toward her.
1644	She looked more relaxed than yesterday, more confident, and again he felt a slight shock at seeing her.
1645	It was different from yesterday, though. Newer feelings now, not simply memories anymore.
1646	If anything, his attraction for her had grown stronger overnight, more intense, and it made him feel a little nervous in her presence.
1647	Allie met him halfway, carrying a small bag in one hand.
1648	She surprised him by kissing him gently on the cheek, her free hand lingering at his waist after she pulled back.
1649	"Hi," she said, radiance in her eyes, "where's the surprise?"
1650	He relaxed a little, thanking God for that.
1651	"Not even a 'Good afternoon' or 'How was your night'?"
1652	She smiled.
1653	Patience had never been one of her strongest attributes.
1654	"Fine. Good afternoon. How was your night?"
1655	And where's the surprise?"
1656	He chuckled lightly, then paused.
1657	"Allie, I've got some bad news?"
1658	"What?"
1659	"I was going to take you someplace, but with those clouds coming in, I'm not sure we should go."
1660	"Why?"
1661	"The storm. We'll be outside and might get wet.
1662	Besides, there might be lightning."
1663	"It's not raining yet.
1664	How far is it?"
1665	"Up the creek about a mile."
1666	"And I've never been there before?"

1667	“Not when it was like this.”
1668	She thought for a second while she looked around.
1669	When she spoke, her voice was determined.
1670	"Then we'll go.
1671	I don't care if it rains.”
1672	"are you sure?"
1673	"Absolutely.”
1674	He looked at the clouds again, noting their approach.
1675	"Then we'd better go now," he said.
1676	"Can I bring that in for you?"
1677	She nodded, handing her bag to him, and he jogged to the house and brought it inside, where he placed it on a chair in the living room.
1678	Then he grabbed some bread and put it in a bag, bringing it with him as he left the house.
1679	They walked to the canoe, Allie beside him.
1680	A little closer than yesterday.
1681	"What exactly is this place?"
1682	"You'll see.”
1683	"You're not even going to give me a hint?"
1684	"Well," he said, "do you remember when we took the canoe out and watched the sun come up?"
1685	"I thought about it this morning.
1686	I remember it made me cry.”
1687	"What you're going to see today makes what you saw then seem ordinary.”
1688	"I guess I should feel special.”
1689	He took a few steps before responding.
1690	"You are special," he finally said, and the way he said it made her wonder if he wanted to add something else.
1691	But he didn't, and Allie smiled a little before glancing away.
1692	As she did, she felt the wind in her face and noticed it had picked up since the morning.
1693	They reached the dock a moment later.
1694	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.
1695	"Can I do anything?"
1696	"No, just get in.”
1697	After she climbed in, he pushed the canoe farther into the water, close to the dock.
1698	Then he gracefully stepped off the dock into the canoe, placing his feet carefully to prevent the canoe from capsizing.
1699	Allie was impressed by his agility, knowing that what he had done so quickly and easily was harder than it looked.
1700	Allie sat at the front of the canoe, facing backward.

1701	He 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.
1702	And it was true.
1703	She could see everything she really wanted to see if she turned her head, but most of all she wanted to watch Noah.
1704	It was him she'd come to see, not the creek.
1705	His shirt was unbuttoned at the top, and she could see his chest muscles flex with every stroke.
1706	His sleeves' were rolled up, too, and she could see the muscles in his arms bulging slightly.
1707	His muscles were well developed there from paddling every morning.
1708	Artistic, she thought..
1709	There's something almost artistic about him when he does this.
1710	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.
1711	When she watched him, she was reminded of how the early explorers must have looked when they'd first discovered this area.
1712	She couldn't think of anyone else who remotely resembled him.
1713	He was complicated, almost contradictory in so many ways, yet simple, a strangely erotic combination.
1714	On the surface he was a country boy, home from war, and he probably saw himself in those terms.
1715	Yet there was so much more to him.
1716	Perhaps it was the poetry that made him different, or perhaps it was the values his father had instilled in him, growing up.
1717	Either way, he seemed to savor life more fully than others appeared to, and that was what had first attracted her to him.
1718	"What are you thinking?"
1719	She felt her insides jump just a bit 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.
1720	He'd always been considerate like that.
1721	Good things," she answered quietly, and she saw in his eyes that he knew she was thinking about him.
1722	She liked the fact that he knew it, and she hoped he had been thinking about her as well
1723	She understood then that something was stirring within her, as it had so many years ago.
1724	Watching him, watching his body move, made her feel it.
1725	And as their eyes lingered for a second, she felt the heat in her neck and breasts, and she flushed, turning away before he noticed.
1726	"How much farther?" she asked.
1727	"Another half mile or so. Not any more than that." A pause.
1728	Then, she said: "It's pretty out here.
1729	So clean. So quiet. It's almost like going back in time."

1730	"In a way it is, I think.
1731	The creek flows from the forest.
1732	There's not a single farm between here and where it starts, and the water is pure as rain.
1733	It's probably as pure as it's ever been."
1734	She leaned toward him.
1735	"Tell me, Noah, what do you remember most from the summer we spent together?"
1736	"All of it."
1737	"Anything in particular?"
1738	"No," he said.
1739	"You don't remember?"
1740	He answered after a moment, quietly, seriously.
1741	"No, it's not that.
1742	It's not what you're thinking.
1743	I was serious when I said 'all of it.
1744	I can remember every moment we were together, and in each of them there was something wonderful.
1745	I can't really pick any one time that meant more than any other.
1746	The entire summer was perfect, the kind of summer everyone should have.
1747	How could I pick one moment over another?
1748	"Poets often describe love as an emotion that we can't control, one that overwhelms logic and common sense.
1749	That's what it was like for me.
1750	I didn't plan on falling in love with you, and I doubt if you planned on falling in love with me.
1751	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.
1752	For me, love like that has happened only once, and that's why every minute we spent together has been seared in my memory.
1753	I'll never forget a single moment of it."
1754	Allie stared at him.
1755	No one had ever said anything like that to her before. Ever.
1756	She didn't know what to say and stayed silent, her face hot.
1757	"I'm sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable, Allie.
1758	I didn't mean to.
1759	But that summer has stayed with me and probably always will.
1760	I know it can't be the same between us, but that doesn't change the way I felt about you then."
1761	She spoke quietly, feeling warm.
1762	"It didn't make me uncomfortable, Noah.
1763	It's just that I don't ever hear things like that.

1764	What you said was beautiful.
1765	It takes a poet to talk the way you do, and like I said, you're the only poet I've ever met.”
1766	Peaceful silence descended on them.
1767	An osprey cried somewhere in the distance.
1768	A mullet splashed near the bank.
1769	The paddle moved rhythmically, causing baffles that rocked the boat ever so slightly.
1770	The breeze had stopped, and the clouds grew blacker as the canoe moved toward some unknown destination.
1771	Allie noticed it all, every sound, every thought.
1772	Her senses had come alive, invigorating her, and she felt her mind drifting through the last few weeks.
1773	She thought about the anxiety coming here had caused her.
1774	The shock at seeing the article, the sleepless nights, her short temper during daylight.
1775	Even yesterday she had been afraid and wanted to run away.
1776	The tension was gone now, every bit of it, replaced by something else, and she was glad about that as she rode in silence in the old red canoe.
1777	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 forever with that knowledge.
1778	She had seen too many men in the past few years destroyed by war, or time, or even money.
1779	It took strength to hold on to inner passion, and Noah had done that.
1780	This was a worker's world, not a poet's, and people would have a hard time understanding Noah.
1781	America was in full swing now, all the papers said so, and people were rushing forward, leaving behind the horrors of war.
1782	She understood the reasons, but they were rushing, like Lon, toward long hours and profits, neglecting the things that brought beauty to the world.
1783	Who did she know in Raleigh who took time off to fix a house?
1784	Or read Whitman or Eliot, finding images in the mind, thoughts of the spirit?
1785	Or hunted down from the bow of a canoe?
1786	These weren't the things that drove society, but she felt they shouldn't be treated as unimportant?
1787	They made living worthwhile.
1788	To her it was the same with art, though she had realized it only upon coming here.
1789	Or rather, remembered it.
1790	She had known it once before, and again she cursed herself for forgetting something as important as creating beauty.
1791	Painting was what she was meant to do, she was sure of that now.
1792	Her feelings this morning had confirmed it, and she knew that whatever happened, she was going to give it another shot.
1793	A fair shot, no matter what anyone said.

1794	Would Lon encourage her painting?
1795	She remembered showing him one of her paintings a couple of months after they had first started going out.
1796	It was an abstract painting and was meant to inspire thought.
1797	In a way, it resembled the painting above Noah's fireplace, the one Noah understood completely, though it may have been a touch less passionate.
1798	Lon had stared at it, studied it almost, and then had asked her what it was supposed to be.
1799	She hadn't bothered to answer.
1800	She shook her head then, knowing she wasn't being completely fair.
1801	She loved Lon, and always had, for other reasons. Though he wasn't Noah, Lon was a good man, the kind of man she'd always known she would marry.
1802	With Lon there would be no surprises, and there was comfort in knowing what the future would bring.
1803	He would be a kind husband to her, and she would be a good wife.
1804	She would have a home near friends and family, children, a respectable place in society.
1805	It was the kind of life she'd always expected to live, the kind of life she wanted to live.
1806	And though she wouldn't describe theirs as a passionate relationship, she had convinced herself long ago that this wasn't necessary to be fulfilled in a relationship, even with a person she intended to marry. Passion would fade in time, and things like companionship and compatibility would take its place.
1807	Passion would fade in time, and things like companionship and compatibility would take its place.
1808	She and Lon had this, and she had assumed this was all she needed.
1809	But now, as she watched Noah rowing, she questioned this basic assumption.
1810	And though she wouldn't describe theirs as a passionate relationship, she had convinced herself long ago that this wasn't necessary to be fulfilled in a relationship, even with a person she intended to marry. Passion would fade in time, and things like companionship and compatibility would take its place.
1811	She tried not to stare and glanced away often, but the easy way he moved his body made it hard to keep her eyes from him for long.
1812	"Here we are," Noah said as he guided the canoe toward some trees near the bank.
1813	Allie looked around, not seeing anything.
1814	"Where is it??"
1815	"Here," he said again, pointing the canoe at an old tree that had fallen over, obscuring an opening almost completely hidden from view.
1816	He guided the canoe around the tree, and both of them had to lower their heads to keep from bumping them.
1817	"Close your eyes," he whispered, and Allie did, bringing her hands to her face.
1818	She heard the baffles of the water and felt the movement of the canoe as he propelled it forward, away from the pull of the creek.
1819	"Okay," he finally said after he'd stopped paddling.
1820	"You can open them now."

CHAPTER 7 SWANS AND STORMS	
1821	Sat in the middle of a small lake fed by the waters of Brices Creek.
1822	It wasn't large, maybe a hundred yards across, and she was surprised at how invisible it had been just moments before
1823	It was spectacular.
1824	Tundra swan and Canada geese literally surrounded them.
1825	Thousands of them. Birds floating so close' together in some places that she couldn't see the water.
1826	From a distance, the groups of swans looked almost like icebergs.
1827	"Oh, Noah," she finally said softly, "it's beautiful."
1828	They sat in silence for a long while, watching the birds.
1829	Noah pointed out a group of chicks, recently hatched, following a pack of geese near the shore, struggling to keep up.
1830	The air was filled with honking and chirping as Noah moved the canoe through the water.
1831	The birds ignored them for the most part.
1832	The only ones who seemed bothered were those forced to move when the canoe approached them.
1833	Allie reached out to touch the closest ones and felt their feathers ruffling under her fingers.
1834	Noah brought out the bag of bread he'd brought earlier and handed it to Allie.
1835	She scattered the bread, favoring the little ones, laughing and smiling as they swam in circles, looking for food.
1836	They stayed until thunder boomed in the distance--faint but powerful--and both of them knew it was time to leave.
1837	Noah led them back to the current of the creek, paddling stronger than he had earlier.
1838	She was still amazed by what she had seen.
1839	"Noah, what are they doing here?"
1840	"I don't know.
1841	I know the swans from up north migrate to Lake Matamuskeet every winter, but I guess they came here this time.
1842	I don't know why.
1843	Maybe the early blizzard had something to do with it.
1844	Maybe they got off track or something.
1845	They'll find their way back, though."
1846	"They won't stay?"
1847	"I doubt it.
1848	They're driven by instinct, and this isn't their place.
1849	Some of the geese may winter here, but the swans will go back to Matamuskeet."
1850	Noah paddled hard as dark clouds rolled directly overhead.
1851	Soon rain began to fall, a light sprinkle at first, then gradually harder.
1852	Lightning ... a pause..., then thunder again.
1853	A little louder now. Maybe six or seven miles away.
1854	More rain as Noah began to paddle even harder, his muscles tightening with every stroke.

1855	Thicker drops now. Falling... Falling with the wind... Falling hard and thick . . . Noah rowing . . . racing the sky..., still getting wet..., cursing to himself., losing to Mother Nature...
1856	The downpour was steady now, and Allie watched the rain fall diagonally from the sky, trying to defy gravity as it rode on westerly winds that whistled over the trees.
1857	The sky darkened a little more, and big heavy drops fell from the clouds.
1858	Hurricane drops.
1859	Allie enjoyed the rain and leaned her head back for a moment to let it hit her face.
1860	She knew the front of her dress would soak through in a couple of minutes, but she 'didn't care.
1861	She did wonder, though, if he noticed, then thought he probably did.
1862	She ran her hands through her hair, feeling its wetness.
1863	It felt wonderful, she felt wonderful, everything felt wonderful.
1864	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
1865	A cloud burst directly above them, and the rain began to come down even harder.
1866	Harder than she'd ever seen it.
1867	Allie looked upward and laughed, giving up any attempt at keeping dry, making Noah feel better.
1868	He hadn't known how she was feeling about it.
1869	Even though she'd made the decision to come, he doubted that she'd expected to be caught in a storm like this.
1870	They reached the dock a couple of minutes later, and Noah moved in close enough for Allie to step out.
1871	He helped her up, then got out himself and dragged the canoe up the bank far enough not to drift away.
1872	Just in case, he tied it to the dock, knowing another minute in the rain wouldn't make any difference.
1873	As he was tying the canoe, he looked up at Allie and stopped breathing for just a second.
1874	She was incredibly beautiful as she waited, watching him, completely comfortable in the rain.
1875	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.
1876	It wasn't a cold rain, but he could see her nipples erect and protruding, hard like little rocks.
1877	He felt his loins begin to stir and quickly turned away, embarrassed, muttering to himself, glad the rain muffled any sound of it.
1878	When he finished and stood, Allie took his hand in hers, surprising him.
1879	Despite the downpour, they didn't rush toward the house, and Noah imagined what it would be like to spend the night with her.
1880	Allie, too, was wondering about him.

1881	She felt the warmth in his hands and wondered what it would be like to have them touch her body, feeling all of her, lingering slowly across her skin.
1882	Just thinking about it made her take a deep breath, and she felt her nipples begin to tingle and a new warmth between her legs.
1883	She realized then that something had changed since she'd come here.
1884	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.
1885	There was no uneasiness between them as they reached the door and both of them went inside, pausing in the foyer, clothes dripping.
1886	"Did you bring a change of clothes?"
1887	She shook her head, still feeling the roll of emotions within her, wondering if it showed on her face.
1888	"I think I can find something here for you so you can get out of those clothes.
1889	It might be a little big, but it's warm."
1890	"Anything," she said
1891	"I'll be back in a second."
1892	Noah slipped off his boots, then ran up the stairs, descending a minute later.
1893	He had a pair of cotton pants and a long-sleeved shirt under one arm and some jeans with a blue shirt in the other.
1894	"Here," he said, handing her the cotton pants and shirt.
1895	"You can change in the bedroom upstairs. There's a bathroom and towel up there too if you want to shower."
1896	She thanked him with a smile and went up the stairs, feeling his eyes on her as she walked.
1897	She entered the bedroom and closed the door, then set the pants and shirt on his bed and peeled everything off.
1898	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.
1899	She felt a secret thrill at being naked in the same room he slept in.
1900	She didn't want to shower after being in the rain.
1901	She liked the soft feeling on her skin, and it reminded her of how people used to live long ago.
1902	Naturally. Like Noah. She slipped on his clothes before looking at herself in the mirror.
1903	The pants were big, but tucking in the shirt helped, and she rolled up the bottoms just a little so they wouldn't drag.
1904	The neck was torn a little and it nearly hung off one shoulder, but she liked the way it looked on her anyway.
1905	She pulled the sleeves up almost to the elbows, went to the bureau, and slipped on some socks, then went to the bathroom to find a hairbrush.
1906	She brushed her wet hair just enough to get out the snarls, letting it rest on her shoulders.
1907	Looking in the mirror, she wished she had brought a clasp or a couple of hairpins.

1908	And a little more mascara. But what could she do?
1909	Her eyes still had a little of what she'd put on earlier, and she touched up with a washcloth, doing the best she could.
1910	When she was finished, she checked herself in the mirror, feeling pretty despite everything, and went back down the stairs.
1911	Noah was in the living room squatting before a fire, doing his best to coax it to life.
1912	He didn't see her come in, and she watched him as he worked.
1913	He had changed his clothes as well and looked good: his shoulders broad, wet hair hanging just over his collar, jeans tight.
1914	He poked the fire, moving the logs, and added some more kindling.
1915	Allie leaned against the doorjamb, one leg crossed over the other, and continued to watch him.
1916	In a few minutes the fire had turned to flames, even and steady.
1917	He turned to the side to straighten the remaining unused logs and caught a glimpse of her out of the corner of his eye.
1918	He turned back to her quickly.
1919	Even in his clothes she looked beautiful.
1920	After a moment he turned away shyly, going back to stacking the logs.
1921	"I didn't hear you come in," he said, trying to sound casual.
1922	"I know.
1923	You weren't supposed to."
1924	She knew what he had been thinking and felt a tinge of amusement at how young he seemed.
1925	"How long have you been standing there?"
1926	"A couple of minutes."
1927	Noah brushed his hands on his pants, then pointed to the kitchen.
1928	"Can I get you some tea?"
1929	I started the water while you were upstairs."
1930	Small talk, anything to keep his mind clear.
1931	But damn, the way she looked...
1932	She thought for a second, saw the way he was looking at her, and felt the old instincts take over.
1933	"Do you have anything stronger, or is it too early to drink?"
1934	He smiled
1935	"I have some bourbon in the pantry.
1936	Is that okay?"
1937	"That sounds great."
1938	He started toward the kitchen, and Allie watched him run his hand through his wet hair as he disappeared.
1939	Thunder boomed loudly, and another downpour started.
1940	Allie could hear the roaring of the rain on the roof, could hear the snapping of logs as the flickering flames lit the room.

1941	She turned to the window and saw the gray sky flash lighter for just a second.
1942	Moments later, another boom of thunder. Close this time.
1943	She took a quilt from the sofa and sat on the rug in front of the fire.
1944	Crossing her legs, she adjusted the quilt until she was comfortable and watched the dancing flames.
1945	Noah came back, saw what she had done, and went to sit beside her.
1946	He put down two glasses and poured some bourbon into each of them.
1947	Outside, the sky grew darker.
1948	Thunder again. Loud.
1949	The storm in full fury, winds whipping the rain in circles.
1950	"It's quite a storm," Noah said as he watched the drops flow in vertical streams on the windows.
1951	He and Allie were close now, though not touching, and Noah watched her chest rise slightly with every breath, imagining the feel of her body once again before fighting it back.
1952	"I like it," she said, taking a sip.
1953	"I've always liked thunderstorms. Even as a young girl."
1954	"Why?" Saying anything, keeping his balance.
1955	"I don't know.
1956	They just always seemed romantic to me."
1957	She was quiet for a moment, and Noah watched the fire flicker in her emerald eyes.
1958	Then she said, "Do you remember sitting together and watching the storm a few nights before I left?"
1959	"Of course."
1960	"I used to think about it all the time after I went home.
1961	I always thought about how you looked that night.
1962	It was the way I always remembered you."
1963	"Have I changed much?"
1964	She took another sip of bourbon, feeling it warm her.
1965	She touched his hand as she answered.
1966	"Not really. Not in the things that I remember.
1967	You're older, of course, with more life behind you, but you've still got the same gleam in your eye.
1968	You still read poetry and float on rivers.
1969	And you've still got a gentleness that not even the war could take away."
1970	He thought about what she'd said and felt her hand lingering on his, her thumb tracing slow circles.
1971	"Allie, you asked me earlier what I remembered most about the summer.
1972	What do you remember?"
1973	It was a while before she answered.
1974	Her voice seemed to come from somewhere else.
1975	"I remember making love.

1976	That's what I remember most.
1977	You were my first, and it was more wonderful than I ever thought it would be."
1978	Noah took a drink of bourbon, remembering, bringing back the old feelings again, then suddenly shook his head.
1979	This was already hard enough
1980	She went on.
1981	"I remember being so afraid beforehand that I was trembling, but at the same time being so excited.
1982	I'm glad you were the first.
1983	I'm glad we were able to share that."
1984	"Me too."
1985	"Were you as afraid as I was?"
1986	Noah nodded without speaking, and she smiled at his honesty.
1987	"I thought so.
1988	You were always shy like that.
1989	Especially in the beginning.
1990	I remember you had asked if I had a boyfriend, and when I said I did, you barely talked to me anymore."
1991	"I didn't want to get between the two of you."
1992	"You did, though, in the end, despite your professed innocence," she said, smiling."
1993	"And I'm glad you did."
1994	"When did you finally tell him about us?"
1995	"After I got home."
1996	"Was it hard?"
1997	"Not at all. I was in love with you."
1998	She squeezed his hand, let go, and moved closer.
1999	She put her hand through his arm, cradling it, and rested her head on his shoulder.
2000	He could smell her, soft like the rain, warm.
2001	She spoke quietly: "Do you remember walking home after the festival?"
2002	I asked you if you wanted to see me again.
2003	You just nodded your head and didn't say a word. It wasn't too convincing."
2004	"I'd never met anyone like you before.
2005	I couldn't help it.
2006	I didn't know what to say."
2007	"I know.
2008	You could never hide anything
2009	Your eyes always gave you away.
2010	You had the most wonderful eyes I'd ever seen."
2011	She paused then, lifted her head from his shoulder, and looked directly at him.
2012	When she spoke, her voice was barely above a whisper.
2013	"I think I loved you more that summer than I ever loved anyone."
2014	Lightning flashed again.

2015	In the quiet moments before the thunder, their eyes met as they tried to undo the fourteen years, both of them sensing a change since yesterday.
2016	When the thunder finally sounded, Noah sighed and turned from her, toward the windows.
2017	"I wish you could have read the letters I wrote you," he said.
2018	She didn't speak for a long while.
2019	"It wasn't just up to you, Noah.
2020	I didn't tell you, but I wrote you a dozen letters after I got home.
2021	I just never sent them."
2022	"Why?" Noah was surprised.
2023	"I guess I was too afraid."
2024	"Of what."
2025	"That maybe it wasn't as real as I thought it was.
2026	That maybe you forgot me." "I would never do that. I couldn't even think it."
2027	"I know that now.
2028	I can see it when I look at you.
2029	But back then, it was different.
2030	There was so much I didn't understand, things that a young girl's mind couldn't sort out."
2031	"What do you mean?"
2032	She paused, collecting her thoughts.
2033	"When your letters never came, I didn't know what to think.
2034	I remember talking to my best friend about what happened that summer, and she said that you got what you wanted, and that she wasn't surprised that you wouldn't write.
2035	I didn't believe that you were that way, I never did, but hearing it and thinking about all our differences made me wonder if maybe the summer meant more to me than it had meant to you....And then, while all this was going through my head, I heard from Sarah.
2036	She said that you had left New Bern."
2037	"Fin and Sarah always knew where I was--" She held up her hand to stop him.
2038	"I know, but I never asked.
2039	I assumed that you had left New Bern to start a new life, one without me.
2040	Why else wouldn't you write? Or call? Or come see?
2041	Noah looked away without answering, and she continued: "I didn't know, and in time, the hurt began to fade and it was easier to just let it go.
2042	At least I thought it was.
2043	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.
2044	But I never sent them for fear of what I might find.
2045	By then, you'd gone on with your life and I didn't want to think about you loving someone else.
2046	I wanted to remember us like we were that summer.
2047	I didn't want to ever lose that."
2048	She said it so sweetly, so innocently, that Noah wanted to kiss her when she finished.
2049	But he didn't.

2050	Instead he fought the urge and pushed it back, knowing it wasn't what she needed.
2051	Yet she felt so wonderful to him, touching him....
2052	"The last letter I wrote was a couple of years ago.
2053	After I met Lon, I wrote to your daddy to find out where you were.
2054	But it had been so long since I'd seen you, I wasn't even sure he'd still be there.
2055	And with the war."
2056	She trailed off, and they were quiet for a moment, both of them lost in thought.
2057	Lightning lit the sky again before Noah finally broke the silence.
2058	"I wish you would have mailed it anyway."
2059	"Why?"
2060	"Just to hear from you.
2061	To hear what you've been up to."
2062	"You might have been disappointed.
2063	My life isn't too exciting.
2064	Besides, I'm not exactly what you remembered."
2065	"You're better than I remembered, Allie."
2066	"You're sweet, Noah."
2067	He almost stopped there, knowing that if he kept the words inside him, he could somehow keep control, the same control he had kept the past fourteen years.
2068	But something else had overtaken him now, and he gave in to it, hoping somehow, in some way, it would take them back to what they'd had so long ago.
2069	"I'm not saying it because I'm sweet.
2070	I'm saying it because I love you now and I always have.
2071	More than you can imagine."
2072	A log snapped, sending sparks up the chimney, and both of them noticed the smoldering remains, almost burned through.
2073	The fire needed another log, but neither of them moved.
2074	Allie took another sip of bourbon and began to feel its effects.
2075	But it wasn't just the alcohol that made her hold Noah a little tighter and feel his warmth against her.
2076	Glancing out the window, she saw the clouds were almost black.
2077	"Let me get the fire going again," Noah said, needing to think, and she released him.
2078	He went to the fireplace, opened the screen, and added a couple of logs.
2079	He used the poker to adjust the burning wood, making sure the new wood could catch easily.
2080	The flame began to spread again, and Noah returned to her side.
2081	She snuggled up against him again, resting her head on his shoulder as she had before, not speaking, rubbing her hand lightly against his chest.
2082	Noah leaned closer and whispered in her ear.
2083	"This reminds me of how we once were.
2084	When we were young."

2085	She smiled, thinking the same thing, and they watched the fire and smoke, holding each other.
2086	"Noah, you've never asked, but I want you to know something."
2087	"What is it?"
2088	Her voice was tender.
2089	"There's never been another, Noah.
2090	You weren't just the first.
2091	You're the only man I've ever been with.
2092	I don't expect you to say the same thing, but I wanted you to know."
2093	Noah was silent as he turned away.
2094	She felt warmer as she watched the fire.
2095	Her hand ran over the muscles beneath his shirt, hard and firm as they leaned against each other.
2096	She remembered when they'd held each other like this for what they'd thought would be the last time.
2097	They were sitting on a sea wall designed to hold back the waters of the Neuse River.
2098	She was crying because they might never see each other again, and she wondered how she could ever be happy again.
2099	Instead of answering, he pressed a note into her hand, which she read on the way home.
2100	She had saved it, occasionally reading all of it or sometimes just a part.
2101	One part she'd read at least a hundred times, and for some reason it ran through her head now.
2102	It said: The reason it hurts so much to separate is because our souls are connected.
2103	Maybe they always have been and will be.
2104	Maybe we've lived a thousand lives before this one and in each of them we've found each other.
2105	And maybe each time, we've been forced apart for the same reasons.
2106	That means that this good-bye is both a goodbye for the past ten thousand years and a prelude to what will come.
2107	When I look at you, I see your beauty and grace and know they have grown stronger with every life you have lived.
2108	And I know I have spent every life before this one searching for you.
2109	Not someone like you, but you, for your soul and mine must always come together.
2110	And then, for a reason neither of us understands, we've been forced to say good-bye.
2111	I would love to tell you that everything will work out for us, and I promise to do all I can to make sure it does.
2112	But if we never meet again and this is truly good-bye, I know we will see each other again in another life.

2113	We will find each other again, and maybe the stars will have changed, and we will not only love each other in that time, but for all the times we've had before.
2114	Could it be? she wondered.
2115	Could he be right?
2116	She had never completely discounted it, wanting to hold on to its promise in case it was true.
2117	The idea had helped her through many hard times.
2118	But sitting here now seemed to test the theory that they were destined to always be apart.
2119	Unless the stars had changed since they were last together.
2120	And maybe they had, but she didn't want to look.
2121	Instead she leaned into him and felt the heat between them, felt his body, felt his arm tight around her.
2122	And her body began to tremble with the same anticipation she had felt the first time they were together.
2123	It felt so right to be here.
2124	Everything felt right.
2125	The fire, the drinks, the storm--it couldn't have been more perfect.
2126	Like magic, it seemed, their years apart didn't matter anymore.
2127	Lightning cut the sky outside.
2128	Fire danced on white-hot wood, spreading the heat.
2129	October rain sheeted itself against the windows, drowning out all other sounds.
2130	They gave in then to everything they had fought the last fourteen years.
2131	Allie lifted her head off his shoulder, looked at him with hazy eyes, and Noah kissed her softly on the lips.
2132	She brought her hand to his face and touched his cheek, brushing it softly with her fingers.
2133	He leaned in slowly and kissed her again, still soft and tender, and she kissed back, feeling the years of separation dissolve into passion.
2134	She closed her eyes and parted her lips as he ran his fingers up and down her arms, slowly, lightly.
2135	He kissed her neck, her cheek, her eyelids, and she felt the moisture of his mouth linger wherever his lips had touched.
2136	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.
2137	The world seemed dreamlike as she pulled back from him, the firelight setting her face aglow.
2138	Without speaking, she started to undo the buttons on his shirt.
2139	He watched her as she did it and listened to her soft breaths as she made her way downward.

2140	With each button he could feel her fingers brushing against his skin, and she smiled softly at him when she finally finished.
2141	He felt her slide her hands inside, touching him as lightly as possible, letting her hands explore his body.
2142	He was hot and she ran her hand over his slightly wet chest, feeling his hair between her fingers.
2143	Leaning in, she kissed his neck gently as she pulled the shirt over his shoulders, locking his arms behind his back.
2144	She lifted her head and allowed him to kiss her as he rolled his shoulders, freeing himself from the sleeves.
2145	With that, he slowly reached for her.
2146	He lifted her shirt and ran his finger slowly across her belly before raising her arms and slipping it off...
2147	She felt short of breath as he lowered his head and kissed between her breasts and slowly ran his tongue up to her neck.
2148	His hands gently caressed her back, her arms, her shoulders, and she felt their heated bodies press together, skin to skin.
2149	He kissed her neck and nibbled gently as she lifted her hips and allowed him to pull off her bottoms.
2150	She reached for the snap on his jeans, undid it, and watched as he slipped them off as well.
2151	It was almost slow motion as their naked bodies finally came together, both of them trembling with the memory of what they had once shared together.
2152	He ran his tongue along her neck while his hands moved over the smooth hot skin of her breasts, down her belly, past her navel, and up again.
2153	He was struck by her beauty.
2154	Her shimmering hair trapped the light and made it sparkle.
2155	Her skin was soft and beautiful, almost glowing in the firelight.
2156	He felt her hands on his back, beckoning him.
2157	They lay back, close to the fire, and the heat made the air seem thick.
2158	Her back was slightly arched as he rolled atop her in one fluid motion
2159	He was on all fours above her, his knees astride her hips.
2160	She lifted her head and kissed his chin and neck, breathing hard, licking his shoulders, and tasting the sweat that lingered on his body.
2161	She ran her hands through his hair as he held himself above her, his arm muscles hard from the exertion.
2162	With a little tempting frown, she pulled him closer, but he resisted.
2163	Instead he lowered himself and lightly rubbed his chest against her, and she felt her body respond with anticipation.
2164	He did this slowly, over and over, kissing every part of her body, listening as she made soft, whimpering sounds while he moved above her.

2165	He did this until she couldn't take it anymore, and when they finally joined as one, she cried aloud and pressed her fingers hard into his back.
2166	She buried her face in his neck and felt him deep inside her, felt his strength and gentleness, felt his muscle and his soul. She moved rhythmically against him, allowing him to take her wherever he wanted, to the place she was meant to be.
2167	She opened her eyes and watched him in the firelight, marveling at his beauty as he moved above her.
2168	She saw his body glisten with crystal sweat and watched as beads rolled down his chest and fell onto her like the rain outside.
2169	And with every drop, with every breath, she felt herself, every responsibility, every facet of her life, slipping away.
2170	Their bodies reflected everything given, everything taken, and she was rewarded with a sensation she never knew existed.
2171	It went on and on, tingling throughout her body and warming her before finally subsiding, and she struggled to catch her breath while she trembled beneath him.
2172	But the moment it was over, another one started to build again, and she started to feel them in long sequences, one right after the next.
2173	By the time the rain had stopped and the sun had set, her body was exhausted but unwilling to stop the pleasure between them.
2174	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.
2175	Sometimes he recited one of his favorite poems as she lay beside him, and she would listen with her eyes closed and almost feel the words.
2176	Then, when they were ready, they would join again and he murmured words of love between kisses as they wrapped their arms around one another.
2177	They went on throughout the evening, making up for their years apart, and slept in each other's arms that night.
2178	Occasionally he would wake up and look at her, her body spent and radiant, and feel as if everything were suddenly right in this world.
2179	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.
2180	He put his fingers to her lips, gently, to keep her from speaking, and for a long time they just looked at one another.
2181	When the lump in his throat subsided, he whispered to her, "You are the answer to every prayer I've offered.
2182	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.
2183	"I love you, Allie, more than you can ever imagine.
2184	I always have, and I always will."
2185	"Oh, Noah," she said, pulling him to her.
2186	She wanted him, needed him now more than ever, like nothing she'd ever known.

CHAPTER 8 COURTROOMS	
2187	Later that morning, three men--two lawyers and the judge--sat in chambers while Lon finished speaking.
2188	It was a moment before the judge answered.
2189	"It's an unusual request," he said, pondering the situation.
2190	"It seems to me the trial could very well end today.
2191	Are you saying this urgent matter can't wait until later this evening or tomorrow?
2192	"No, Your Honor, it can't," Lon answered almost too quickly.
2193	Stay relaxed, he told himself.
2194	Take a deep breath.
2195	"And it has nothing to do with this case?"
2196	"No, Your Honor.
2197	It's of a personal nature
2198	I know it's out of the ordinary, but I really need to take care of it."
2199	Good, better.
2200	The judge leaned back in his chair, evaluating him for a moment.
2201	"Mr. Bates, how do you feel about this?"
2202	He cleared his throat.
2203	"Mr. Hammond called me this morning and I've already spoken to my clients.
2204	They're willing to postpone until Monday."
2205	"I see," the judge said.
2206	"And do you believe it is in your clients' best interests to do this?"
2207	"I believe so," he said.
2208	"Mr. Hammond has agreed to reopen discussion on a certain matter not covered by this proceeding."
2209	The judge looked hard at both of them and thought about it.
2210	"I don't like it," he finally said, "not at all.
2211	But Mr. Hammond has never made a similar request before, and I assume the matter is very important to him."
2212	He paused for effect, then looked to some papers on his desk.
2213	"I'll agree to adjourn until Monday.
2214	Nine o'clock sharp."
2215	"Thank you, Your Honor," Lon said.
2216	Two minutes later he was leaving the courthouse.
2217	He walked to the car he had parked directly across the street, got in, and began the drive to New Bern, his hands shaking.
CHAPTER 9 AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR	
2218	Noah made breakfast for Allie while she slept in the living room.
2219	Bacon, biscuits, and coffee, nothing spectacular.
2220	He set the tray beside her as she woke up, and as soon as they had finished eating, they made love again.
2221	It was relentless, a powerful confirmation of what they had shared the day before.

2222	Allie arched her back and cried out fiercely in the final tidal wave of sensations, then wrapped her arms around him as they breathed in unison, exhausted.
2223	They showered together, and afterward Allie put on her dress, which had dried overnight.
2224	She spent the morning with Noah.
2225	Together they fed Clem and checked the windows to make sure no damage had been done in the storm.
2226	Two pine trees had blown over, though neither had caused much damage, and a few shingles had blown off the shed, but other than that, the property had escaped pretty much unscathed.
2227	He held her hand most of the morning and the two talked easily, but sometimes he would stop speaking and just stare at her.
2228	When he did, she felt as though she should say something, but nothing meaningful ever came into her head.
2229	Lost in thought, she usually just kissed him.
2230	A little before noon, Noah and Allie went in to prepare lunch.
2231	Both of them were starving again because they hadn't eaten much the day before.
2232	Using what he had on hand, they fried some chicken and baked another batch of biscuits, and the two of them ate on the porch, serenaded by a mockingbird.
2233	While they were inside doing the dishes, they heard a knock at the door.
2234	Noah left Allie in the kitchen.
2235	Knock again.
2236	"I'm coming," Noah said.
2237	Knock, knock. Louder.
2238	He approached the door. Knock, knock.
2239	"I'm coming," he said again as he opened the door.
2240	"Oh, my God."
2241	He stared for a moment at a beautiful woman in her early fifties, a woman he would have recognized anywhere.
2242	Noah couldn't speak.
2243	"Hello, Noah," she finally said.
2244	Noah said nothing.
2245	"May I come in?" she asked, her voice steady, revealing nothing.
2246	He stammered out a reply as she walked past him, stopping just before the stairs.
2247	"Who is it?"
2248	Allie shouted from the kitchen, and the woman turned at the sound of her voice.
2249	"It's your mother," Noah finally answered, and immediately after he said it, he heard the sound of breaking glass.
2250	"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.
2251	"How could you be so sure?"
2252	"You're my daughter.
2253	One day when you have kids of your own, you'll know the answer."

2254	She smiled, but her manner was stiff, and Noah imagined how difficult this must be for her.
2255	"I saw the article, too, and I saw your reaction.
2256	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."
2257	"What about Daddy?"
2258	Anne Nelson shook her head.
2259	"No, I didn't tell your father or anyone else about it.
2260	Nor did I tell anyone where I was going today."
2261	The table was silent for a moment as they wondered what was coming next, but Anne remained quiet.
2262	"Why did you come?"
2263	Allie finally asked.
2264	Her mother raised an eyebrow.
2265	"I thought I would be the one to ask that question."
2266	Allie paled.
2267	"I came because I had to," her mother said, "which I'm sure is the same reason you came.
2268	Am I right?"
2269	Allie nodded.
2270	Anne turned to Noah.
2271	"These last couple of days must have been full of surprises."
2272	"Yes," he answered simply, and she smiled at him.
2273	"I know you don't think so, but I always liked you, Noah.
2274	I just didn't think you were right for my daughter.
2275	Can you understand that?"
2276	He shook his head as he answered, his tone serious.
2277	"No, not really. It wasn't fair to me, and it wasn't fair to Allie.
2278	Otherwise she wouldn't be here."
2279	She watched him as he answered, but she said nothing.
2280	Allie, sensing an argument, cut in: - "What do you mean when you say you had to come?"
2281	Don't you trust me?"
2282	Anne turned back to her daughter.
2283	"This has nothing to do with trust.
2284	This has to do with Lon.
2285	He called the house last night to talk to me about Noah, and he's on his way here right now.
2286	He seemed very upset.
2287	I thought you'd want to know."
2288	Allie inhaled sharply.
2289	"He's on his way?"
2290	"As we speak.

2291	He arranged to have the trial postponed until next week.
2292	If he's not in New Bern yet, he's close."
2293	"What did you say to him?"
2294	"Not much. But he knew.
2295	He had it all figured out.
2296	He remembered my telling him about Noah a long time ago."
2297	Allie swallowed hard.
2298	"Did you tell him I was here ?"
2299	"No. And I won't.
2300	That's between you and him.
2301	But knowing him, I'm sure he'll find you here if you stay.
2302	All it takes is a couple of phone calls to the right people.
2303	After all, I was able to find you."
2304	Allie, though obviously worried, smiled at her mother.
2305	"Thank you," she said, and her mother reached for her hand.
2306	"I know we've had our differences, Allie, and that we haven't seen eye to eye on everything.
2307	I'm not perfect, but I did the best I could with raising you.
2308	I'm your mother and I always will be.
2309	That means I'll always love you."
2310	Allie was silent for a moment, then: "What should I do?"
2311	"I don't know, Allie.
2312	That's up to you.
2313	But I would think about it.
2314	Think about what you really want."
2315	Allie turned away, her eyes reddening.
2316	A moment later a tear drifted down her cheek.
2317	"I don't know....," she trailed off, and her mother squeezed her hand.
2318	Anne looked at Noah, who had been sitting with his head down, listening carefully.
2319	As if on cue, he returned her gaze, nodded, and left the room.
2320	When he was gone, Anne whispered, "Do you love him?"
2321	"Yes, I do," Allie answered softly, "very much."
2322	"Do you love Lon."
2323	"Yes, I do. I love him, too.
2324	Dearly, but in a different way. He doesn't make me feel the way Noah does."
2325	"No one will ever do that," her mother said, and she released Allie's hand.
2326	"I can't make this decision for you, Allie, this one's all yours.
2327	I want you to know, though, that I love you.
2328	And I always will.
2329	I know that doesn't help, but it's all I can do."

2330	She reached in her pocketbook and removed a bundle of letters held together with string, the envelopes old and slightly yellowed.
2331	"These are the letters that Noah wrote you.
2332	I never threw them away, and they haven't been opened.
2333	I know I shouldn't have kept them from you, and I'm sorry for that.
2334	But I was just trying to protect you. I didn't realize..."
2335	Allie took them and ran her hand over them, shocked.
2336	"I should go, Allie.
2337	You've got some decisions to make, and you don't have much time.
2338	Do you want me to stay in town?"
2339	Allie shook her head.
2340	"No, this is up to me."
2341	Anne nodded and watched her daughter for a moment, wondering.
2342	Finally she stood, went around the table, leaned over, and kissed her daughter on the cheek.
2343	She could see the question in her daughter's eyes as Allie stood from the table and embraced her.
2344	"What are you going to do?" her mother asked, pulling back.
2345	There was a long pause.
2346	"I don't know," Allie finally answered.
2347	They stood together for another minute, just holding each other.
2348	"Thanks for coming," Allie said.
2349	"I love you."
2350	"I love you, too."
2351	On her way out the door, Allie thought that she heard her mother whisper, "Follow your heart," but she couldn't be sure.
CHAPTER 10 CROSSROADS	
2352	Noah opened the door for Anne Nelson as she went out.
2353	"Good-bye, Noah," she said quietly.
2354	He nodded without speaking.
2355	There wasn't anything else to say; they both knew that.
2356	She turned from him and left, closing the door behind her.
2357	Noah watched her walk to her car, get in, and drive away without looking back.
2358	She was a strong woman, he thought to himself, and he knew where Allie got it from.
2359	Noah peeked in the living room, saw Allie sitting with her head down, then went to the back porch, knowing that she needed to be alone.
2360	He sat quietly in his rocker and watched the water drifting by as the minutes passed.
2361	After what seemed like an eternity, he heard the back door open.
2362	He didn't turn to look at her just then--for some reason he couldn't--and he listened as she sat in the chair beside him.
2363	"I'm sorry," Allie said.
2364	"I had no idea this would happen."

2365	Noah shook his head.
2366	"Don't be sorry.
2367	We both knew it was coming in some form or another."
2368	"It's still hard."
2369	"I know."
2370	He finally turned to her, reaching for her hand.
2371	"Is there anything I can do to make it easier?"
2372	She shook her head.
2373	"No. Not really. I have to do this alone.
2374	Besides, I'm not sure what I'm going to say to him yet."
2375	She looked down and her voice became softer and a little more distant, as if she were talking to herself.
2376	"I guess it depends on him and how much he knows.
2377	If my mother was right, he may have suspicions, but he doesn't know anything for sure."
2378	Noah felt a tightness in his stomach.
2379	When he finally spoke his voice was steady, but she could hear the pain in it.
2380	"You're not going to tell him about us, are you?"
2381	"I don't know.
382	I really don't.
2383	While I was in the living room, I kept asking myself what I really wanted in my life."
2384	She squeezed his hand.
2385	"And do you know what the answer was?"
2386	The answer was that I wanted two things.
2387	First, I want you.
2388	I want us.
2389	I love you and I always have."
2390	She took a deep breath before going on.
2391	"But I also want a happy ending without hurting anyone.
2392	And I know that if I stayed, people would be hurt.
2393	Especially Lon. I wasn't lying when I told you that I love him.
2394	He doesn't make me feel the same way you do, but I care for him, and this wouldn't be fair to him.
2395	But staying here would also hurt my family and friends.
2396	I would be betraying everyone I know I don't know if I can do that."
2397	"You can't live your life for other people.
2398	You've got to do what's right for you, even if it hurts some people you love."
2399	"I know," she said, "but no matter what I choose I have to live with it.
2400	Forever. I have to be able to go forward and not look back anymore.
2401	Can you understand that?"
2402	He shook his head and tried to keep his voice steady.
2403	"Not really. Not if it means losing you.

2404	I can't do that again."
2405	She didn't say anything but lowered her head.
2406	Noah went on: "Could you really leave me without looking back?"
2407	She bit her lip as she answered.
2408	Her voice was beginning to crack.
2409	"I don't know. Probably not."
2410	"Would that be fair to Lon?"
2411	She didn't answer right away.
2412	Instead she stood, wiped her face, and walked to the edge of the porch where she leaned against the post.
2413	She crossed her arms and watched the water before answering quietly.
2414	"No."
2415	"It doesn't have to be like this, Allie," he said.
2416	"We're adults now, we have the choice we didn't have before.
2417	We're meant to be together.
2418	We always have been."
2419	He walked to her side and put his hand on her shoulder.
2420	"I don't want to live the rest of my life thinking about you and dreaming of what might have been.
2421	Stay with me, Allie."
2422	Tears began to fill her eyes.
2423	"I don't know if I can," she finally whispered.
2424	"You can.
2425	Allie... I can't live my life happily knowing you're with someone else.
2426	That would kill a part of me.
2427	What we have is rare.
2428	It's too beautiful to just throw it away."
2429	She didn't respond.
2430	After a moment he gently turned her toward him, took her hands, and stared at her, willing her to look at him.
2431	Allie finally faced him with moist eyes.
2432	After a long silence, Noah brushed the tears from her cheeks with his fingers, a look of tenderness on his face.
2433	His voice caught as he saw what her eyes were telling him.
2434	"You're not going to stay, are you?"
2435	He smiled weakly.
2436	"You want to, but you can't."
2437	"Oh, Noah," she said as the tears began again, "please try to understand " He shook his head to stop her.
2438	"I know what you're trying to say--I can see it in your eyes.
2439	But I don't want to understand it, Allie.

2440	I don't want it to end this way.
2441	I don't want it to end at all.
2442	But if you leave, we both know we'll never see each other again.”
2443	She leaned into him and began to cry harder as Noah fought back his own tears.
2444	He wrapped his arms around her.
2445	"Allie, I can't force you to stay with me.
2446	But no matter what happens in my life, I'll never forget these last couple of days with you.
2447	I've been dreaming about this for years.”
2448	He kissed her gently, and they embraced as they had when she first got out of her car two days ago.
2449	Finally, Allie let him go and wiped her tears.
2450	"I have to get my things, Noah.”
2451	He didn't go inside with her.
2452	Instead he sat down in the rocker, spent.
2453	He watched her go into the house and listened as the sound of her movements faded into nothing.
2454	She emerged from the house minutes later with everything she'd brought and walked toward him with her head down.
2455	She handed him the drawing she had done yesterday morning.
2456	As he took it, he noticed that she hadn't stopped crying.
2457	"Here, Noah. I made this for you.”
2458	Noah took the drawing and unrolled it slowly, careful not to tear it.
2459	There were dual images, one overlapping the other.
2460	The image in the foreground, which occupied most of the page, was a picture of how he looked now, not fourteen years ago.
2461	Noah noticed that she had penciled in every detail of his face, including the scar.
2462	It was almost as if she'd copied it from a recent photograph.
2463	The second image was that of the front of the house.
2464	The detail there was also incredible, as if she had sketched it while sitting beneath the oak tree.
2465	"It's beautiful, Allie.
2466	Thank you." He attempted a smile.
2467	"I told you that you were an artist.”
2468	She nodded, her face cast downward, her lips pressed together.
2469	It was time for her to go.
2470	They walked to her car slowly, without speaking.
2471	When they reached it, Noah embraced her again until he could feel the tears welling up in his own eyes.
2472	He kissed her lips and both cheeks, then with his finger softly brushed the places he'd kissed.
2473	"I love you, Allie.”

2474	"I love you, too."
2475	Noah opened her car door, and they kissed one more time.
2476	Then she slid behind the wheel, never taking her eyes from him.
2477	She put the packet of letters and the pocketbook next to her on the seat and fumbled for the keys, then turned the ignition.
2478	It started easily, and the engine began to turn over impatiently.
2479	It was almost time.
2480	Noah pushed her door closed with both hands, and Allie rolled down the window.
2481	She could see the muscles in his arms, the easy smile, the tanned face.
2482	She reached out her hand and Noah took it for just a moment, moving his fingers softly against her skin.
2483	"Stay with me," Noah mouthed without sound, and this for some reason hurt more than Allie would have expected.
2484	The tears began to fall hard now, but she couldn't speak.
2485	Finally, reluctantly, she looked away and pulled her hand from his.
2486	She put the car in gear and eased the pedal down just a bit.
2487	If she didn't leave now, she never would.
2488	Noah backed up just a bit as the car started to roll away.
2489	He fell into an almost trancelike state as he felt the reality of the situation.
2490	He watched the car roll slowly forward; he heard the gravel crunching under the wheels.
2491	Slowly the car began to turn from him, toward the road that would take her back to town.
2492	Leaving--she was leaving! -and Noah felt dizzy at the sight.
2493	Edging forward..., past him now...
2494	She waved one last time without smiling before she began to accelerate, and he waved back weakly.
2495	"Don't go!" he wanted to shout as the car moved farther away.
2496	But he didn't say anything, and a minute later the car was gone and the only remaining signs of her were the tracks that her car had left behind.
2497	He stood there without moving for a long time.
2498	As quickly as she had come, she was gone.
2499	Forever this time. Forever.
2500	He closed his eyes then and watched her leave once more, her car moving steadily away from him, taking his heart with her.
2501	But, like her mother, he realized sadly, she never looked back.
CHAPTER 11 A LETTER FROM YESTERDAY	
2502	Driving with tears in her eyes was difficult, but she went on anyway, hoping that instinct would take her back to the inn.
2503	She kept the window rolled down, thinking the fresh air might help clear her mind, but it didn't seem to help.
2504	Nothing would help.
2505	She was tired, and she wondered if she would have the energy she needed to talk to Lon.

2506	And what was she going to say?
2507	She still had no idea but hoped that something would come to her when the time came.
2508	It would have to.
2509	By the time she reached the drawbridge that led to Front Street, she had herself a little more under control.
2510	Not completely, but well enough, she thought, to talk to Lon.
2511	At least she hoped so.
2512	Traffic was light, and she had time to watch strangers going about their business as she drove through New Bern.
2513	At a gas station, a mechanic was looking under the hood of a new automobile while a man, presumably its owner, stood beside him.
2514	Two women were pushing baby carriages just outside Hoffman-Lane, chatting between themselves while they window-shopped.
2515	In front of Hearn's Jewelers, a well-dressed man walked briskly, carrying a briefcase.
2516	She made another turn and saw a young man unloading groceries from a truck that blocked part of the street.
2517	Something about the way he held himself, or the way he moved, reminded her of Noah harvesting crabs at the end of the dock.
2518	She saw the inn just up the street while she was stopped at a red light.
2519	She took a deep breath when the light turned green and drove slowly until she reached the parking lot that the inn shared with a couple of other businesses.
2520	She turned in and saw Lon's car sitting in the first spot.
2521	Although the one next to it was open, she passed it and picked a spot a little farther from the entrance.
2522	She turned the key, and the engine stopped promptly.
2523	Next she reached into the glove compartment for a mirror and brush, finding both sitting on top of a map of North Carolina.
2524	Looking at herself, she saw her eyes were still red and puffy.
2525	Like yesterday after the rain, as she examined her reflection, she was sorry she didn't have any makeup, though she doubted it would help much now.
2526	She tried pulling her hair back on one side, tried both sides, then finally gave up.
2527	She reached for her pocketbook, opened it, and once again looked at the article that had brought her here.
2528	So much had happened since then; it was hard to believe it had been only three weeks.
2529	It felt impossible to her that she had arrived only the day before yesterday.
2530	It seemed like a lifetime since her dinner with Noah.
2531	Starlings chirped in the trees around her.
2532	The clouds had begun to break up now, and Allie could see blue in between patches of white.
2533	The sun was still shaded, but she knew it would only be a matter of time.
2534	It was going to be a beautiful day.

2535	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.
2536	She untied the packet and found the first letter he had written her.
2537	She began to open it, then stopped because she could imagine what was in it.
2538	Something simple, no doubt--things he'd done, memories of the summer, perhaps some questions.
2539	After all, he probably expected an answer from her.
2540	Instead she reached for the last letter he'd written, the one on the bottom of the stack.
2541	The good-bye letter.
2542	This one interested her far more than the others.
2543	How had he said it?
2544	How would she have said it?
2545	The envelope was thin.
2546	One, maybe two pages.
2547	Whatever he had written wasn't too long.
2548	First, she turned it over and checked the back.
2549	No name, just a street address in New Jersey.
2550	She held her breath as she used her fingernail to pry it open.
2551	Unfolding it, she saw it was dated March 1935.
2552	Two and a half years without a reply.
2553	She imagined him sitting at an old desk, crafting the letter, somehow knowing this was the end, and she saw what she thought were tearstains on the paper.
2554	Probably just her imagination.
2555	She straightened the page and began to read in the soft white sunlight that shone through the window.
2556	My dearest Allie, I don't know what to say anymore except that I couldn't sleep last night because I knew that it is over between us.
2557	It is a different feeling for me, one that I never expected, but looking back, I suppose it couldn't have ended another way.
2558	You and I were different.
2559	We came from different worlds, and yet you were the one who taught me the value of love.
2560	You showed me what it was like to care for another, and I am a better man because of it.
2561	I don't want you to ever forget that.
2562	I am not bitter because of what has happened.
2563	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 period of time.
2564	And if, in some distant place in the future, we see each other in our new lives, I will smile at you with joy, and remember how we spent a summer beneath the trees, learning from each other and growing in love.
2565	And maybe, for a brief moment, you'll feel it too, and you'll smile back, and savor the memories we will always share together.
2566	I love you, Allie. Noah

2567	She read the letter again, more slowly this time, then read it a third time before she put it back into the envelope.
2568	Once more, she imagined him writing it, and for a moment she debated reading another, but she knew she couldn't delay any longer.
2569	Lon was waiting for her.
2570	Her legs felt weak as she stepped out of the car.
2571	She paused and took a deep breath, and as she started across the parking lot, she realized she still wasn't sure what she was going to say to him.
2572	And the answer didn't finally come until she reached the door and opened it and saw Lon standing in the lobby.
CHAPTER 12 WINTER FOR TWO	
2573	The story ends there, so I close the notebook, remove my glasses, and wipe my eyes.
2574	They are tired and bloodshot, but they have not failed me so far.
2575	They will soon, I am sure.
2576	Neither they nor I can go on forever.
2577	I look to her now that I have finished, but she does not look back.
2578	Instead she is staring out the window at the courtyard, where friends and family meet.
2579	My eyes follow hers, and we watch it together.
2580	In all these years the daily pattern has not changed.
2581	Every morning, an hour after breakfast, they begin to arrive.
2582	Young adults, alone or with family, come to visit those who live here.
2583	They bring photographs and gifts and either sit on the benches or stroll along the tree-lined paths designed to give a sense of nature.
2584	Some will stay for the day, but most leave after a few hours, and when they do, I always feel sadness for those they've left behind.
2585	I wonder sometimes what my friends think as they see their loved ones driving off, but I know it's not my business.
2586	And I do not ever ask them because I've learned that we're all entitled to have our secrets.
2587	But soon, I will tell you some of mine.
2588	I place the notebook and magnifier on the table beside me, feeling the ache in my bones as I do so, and I realize once again how cold my body is.
2589	Even reading in the morning sun does nothing to help it.
2590	This does not surprise me anymore, though, for my body makes its own rules these days.
2591	I'm not completely unfortunate, however.
2592	The people who work here know me and my faults and do their best to make me more comfortable.
2593	They have left me hot tea on the end table, and I reach for it with both hands.
2594	It is an effort to pour a cup, but I do so because the tea is needed to warm me and I think the exertion will keep me from completely rusting away.
2595	But I am rusted now, no doubt about it.
2596	Rusted as a junked car twenty years in the Everglades.
2597	I have read to her this morning, as I do every morning, because it is something I must do.

2598	Not for duty--although I suppose a case could be made for this--but for another, more romantic, reason.
2599	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 anymore, at least not for me.
2600	Besides, I have no idea how it's going to turn out, and to be honest, I'd rather not get my hopes up.
2601	We spend each and every day together now, but our nights are spent alone.
2602	The doctors tell me that I'm not allowed to see her after dark.
2603	I understand the reasons completely, and though I agree with them, I sometimes break the rules.
2604	Late at night when my mood is right, I will sneak from my room and go to hers and watch her while she sleeps.
2605	Of this she knows nothing.
2606	I'll come in and see her breathe and know that had it not been for her, I would never have married.
2607	And when I look at her face, a face I know better than my own, I know that I have meant as much or more to her.
2608	And that means more to me than I could ever hope to explain.
2609	Sometimes, when I am standing there, I think about how lucky I am to have been married to her for almost forty-nine years.
2610	Next month it will be that long.
2611	She heard me snore for the first forty-five, but since then we have slept in separate rooms.
2612	I do not sleep well without her.
2613	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.
2614	I sleep two hours if I am lucky, and still I wake before dawn.
2615	This makes no sense to me.
2616	Soon, this will all be over.
2617	I know this.
2618	She does not.
2619	The entries in my diary have become shorter and take little time to write.
2620	I keep them simple now, since most of my days are the same.
2621	But tonight, I think I will copy a poem that one of the nurses found for me and thought I would enjoy.
2622	It goes like this: I never was struck before that hour with love so sudden and so sweet, Her face it bloomed like a sweet flower And stole my heart away complete.
2623	Because our evenings are our own, I have been asked to visit the others.
2624	Usually I do, for I am the reader and I am needed, or so I am told.
2625	I walk the halls and choose where to go because I am too old to devote myself to a schedule, but deep down I always know who needs me.

2626	They are my friends, and when I push open their doors, I see rooms that look like mine, always semi darkened, illuminated only by the lights of Wheel of Fortune and Vanna's* teeth.
2627	The furniture is the same for everyone, and the TVs blare because no one can hear well anymore.
2628	Men or women, they smile at me when I enter and speak in whispers as they turn off their sets.
2629	"I'm so glad you've come," they say, and then they ask about my wife.
2630	Sometimes I tell them.
2631	I might tell them of her sweetness and her charm and describe how she taught me to see the world for the beautiful place it is.
2632	Or I tell them of our early years together and explain how we had all we needed when we held each other under starry southern skies.
2633	On special occasions I whisper of our adventures together, of art shows in New York and Paris or the rave reviews from critics writing in languages I do not understand.
2634	Mostly, though, I smile and I tell them that she is the same, and they turn from me, for I know they do not want me to see their faces.
2635	It reminds them of their own mortality.
2636	So I sit with them and read to lessen their fears.
2637	Be composed--be at ease with me...
2638	Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you, Not till the waters refuse to glisten for you and the leaves to rustle for you, do my words refuse to glisten and rustle for you.
2639	And I read, to let them know who I am.
2640	I wander all night in my vision...
2641	Bending with open eyes over the shut eyes of sleepers, Wandering and confused, lost to myself, ill-assorted, contradictory, Pausing, gazing, bending, and stopping.
2642	If she could, my wife would accompany me on my evening excursions, for one of her Many loves was poetry.
2643	Thomas, Whitman, Eliot, Shakespeare, and King David of the Psalms.
2644	Lovers of words, makers of language.
2645	Looking back, I am surprised by my passion for it, and sometimes I even regret it now.
2646	Poetry brings great beauty to life, but also great sadness, and I'm not sure it's a fair exchange for someone my age.
2647	A man should enjoy other things if he can; he should spend his final days in the sun.
2648	Mine will be spent by a reading lamp.
2649	I shuffle toward her and sit in the chair beside her bed.
2650	My back aches when I sit.
2651	I must get a new cushion for this chair; I remind myself for the hundredth time.
2652	I reach for her hand and take it, bony and fragile.
2653	It feels nice.
2654	She responds with a twitch, and gradually her thumb begins to softly rub my finger.
2655	I do not speak until she does; this I have learned.

2656	Most days I sit in silence until the sun goes down, and on days like those I know nothing about her.
2657	Minutes pass before she finally turns to me.
2658	She is crying.
2659	I smile and release her hand, then reach in my pocket.
2660	I take out a handkerchief and wipe at her tears.
2661	She looks at me as I do so, and I wonder what she is thinking.
2662	"That was a beautiful story."
2663	A light rain begins to fall. Little drops tap gently on the window.
2664	I take her hand again.
2665	It is going to be a good day, a very good day. A magical day.
2666	I smile, I can't help it.
2667	"Yes, it is," I tell her.
2668	"Did you write it?" she asks.
2669	Her voice is like a whisper, a light wind flowing though the leaves.
2670	"Yes," I answer.
2671	She turns toward the nightstand...
2672	Her medicine is in a little cup. Mine too.
2673	Little pills, colors like a rainbow so we won't forget to take them.
2674	They bring mine here now, to her room, even though they're not supposed to.
2675	"I've heard it before, haven't I?"
2676	"Yes," I say again, just as I do every time on days like these.
2677	I have learned to be patient.
2678	She studies my face. Her eyes are as green as ocean waves.
2679	"It makes me feel less afraid," she says.
2680	"I know."
2681	I nod, rocking my head softly.
2682	She turns away, and I wait some more.
2683	She releases my hand and reaches for her water glass.
2684	It is on her nightstand, next to the medicine.
2685	She takes a sip.
2686	"Is it a true story?"
2687	She sits up a little in her bed and takes another, drink.
2688	Her body is still strong.
2689	"I mean, did you know these people?"
2690	"Yes," I say again.
2691	I could say more, but usually I don't.
2692	She is still beautiful.
2693	She asks the obvious: "Well, which one did she finally marry?"
2694	I answer: "The one who was right for her."
2695	"Which one was that?"

2696	I smile.
2697	"You'll know," I say quietly, "by the end of the day.
2698	You'll know."
2699	She does not know what to think about this but does not question me further.
2700	Instead she begins to fidget.
2701	She is thinking of a way to ask me another question, though she isn't sure how to do it.
2702	Instead she chooses to put it off for a moment and reaches for one of the little paper cups.
2703	"Is this mine?"
2704	"No, this one is," and I reach over and push her medicine toward her.
2705	I cannot grab it with my fingers.
2706	She takes it and looks at the pills.
2707	I can tell by the way she is looking at them that she has no idea what they are for.
2708	I use both hands to pick up my cup and dump the pills into my mouth.
2709	She does the same.
2710	There is no fight today.
2711	That makes it easy.
2712	I raise my cup in a mock toast and wash the gritty flavor from my mouth with my tea.
2713	It is getting colder.
2714	She swallows on faith and washes them down with more water.
2715	A bird starts to sing outside the window, and we both turn our heads.
2716	We sit quietly for a while, enjoying something beautiful together.
2717	Then it is lost, and she sighs.
2718	"I have to ask you something else," she says.
2719	"Whatever it is, I'll try to answer."
2720	"It's hard, though."
2721	She does not look at me, and I cannot see her eyes.
2722	This is how she hides her thoughts.
2723	Some things never change.
2724	"Take your time," I say.
2725	I know what she will ask.
2726	Finally, she turns to me and looks into my eyes.
2727	She offers a gentle smile, the kind you share with a child, not a lover.
2728	"I don't want to hurt your feelings because you've been so nice to me, but.."
2729	I wait.
2730	Her words will hurt me.
2731	They will tear a piece from my heart and leave a scar.
2732	"Who are you?"
2733	We have lived at Creek side Extended Care Facility for three years now.
2734	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.

2735	We boarded up our home because neither of us could bear to sell it, signed some papers, and just like that we received a place to live and die in exchange for some of the freedom for which we had worked a lifetime.
2736	She was right to do this, of course.
2737	There is no way I could have made it alone, for sickness has come to us, both of us.
2738	We are in the final minutes in the day of our lives, and the clock is ticking. Loudly.
2739	I wonder if I am the only one who can hear it.
2740	A throbbing pain courses through my fingers, and it reminds me that we have not held hands with fingers interlocked since we moved here.
2741	I am sad about this, but it is my fault, not hers.
2742	It is arthritis in the worst form, rheumatoid and advanced.
2743	My hands are misshapen and grotesque now, and they throb during most of my waking hours.
2744	I look at them and want them gone, amputated, but then I would not be able to do the little things I must do.
2745	So, I use my claws, as I call them sometimes, and every day I take her hands despite the pain, and I do my best to hold them because that is what she wants me to do.
2746	Although the Bible says man can live to be 120, I don't want to, and I don't think my body would make it even if I did
2747	It is falling apart, dying one piece at a time, steady erosion on the inside and at the joints.
2748	My hands are useless, my kidneys are beginning to fail, and my heart rate is decreasing every month.
2749	Worse, I have cancer again, this time of the prostate.
2750	This is my third bout with the unseen enemy, and it will take me eventually, though not till I say it is time.
2751	The doctors are worried about me, but I am not.
2752	I have no time for worry in this twilight of my life.
2753	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.
2754	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.
2755	A dozen pictures line the walls of my room.
2756	They are my heritage, my contribution to the world.
2757	I am very proud.
2758	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.
2759	There is so much about her I don't understand anymore.
2760	I wonder what my daddy would think of my life and what he would do if he were me.
2761	I have not seen him for fifty years and he is now but a shadow in my thoughts.
2762	I cannot picture him clearly anymore; his face is darkened as if a light shines from behind him.
2763	I am not sure if this is due to a failing memory or simply the passage of time.
2764	I have only one picture of him, and this too has faded.

2765	In another ten years it will be gone and so will I, and his memory will be erased like a message in the sand.
2766	If not for my diaries, I would swear I had lived only half as long as I have.
2767	Long periods of my life seem to have vanished.
2768	And even now I read the passages and wonder who I was when I wrote them, for I cannot remember the events of my life.
2769	There are times I sit and wonder where it all has gone.
2770	"My name," I say, "is Duke."
2771	I have always been a John Wayne fan.
2772	"Duke," she whispers to herself, "Duke."
2773	She thinks for a moment, her forehead wrinkled, her eyes serious.
2774	"Yes," I say, "I'm here for you."
2775	And always will be, I think to myself.
2776	She flushes with my answer.
2777	Her eyes become wet and red, and tears begin to fall.
2778	My heart aches for her, and I wish for the thousandth time that there was something I could do.
2779	She says: "I'm sorry."
2780	I don't understand anything that's happening to me right now. Even you.
2781	When I listen to you talk, I feel like I should know you, but I don't.
2782	I don't even know my name.
2783	"She wipes at her tears and says, "Help me, Duke, help me remember who I am.
2784	Or at least, who I was.
2785	I feel so lost."
2786	I answer from my heart, but I lie to her about her name.
2787	As I have about my own.
2788	There is a reason for this.
2789	"You are Hannah, a lover of life, a strength to those who shared in your friendships.
2790	You are a dream, a creator of happiness, an artist who has touched a thousand souls.
2791	You've led a full life and wanted for nothing because your needs are spiritual and you have only to look inside you.
2792	You are kind and loyal, and you are able to see beauty where others do not.
2793	You are a teacher of wonderful lessons, a dreamer of better things."
2794	I stop for a moment and catch my breath.
2795	Then, "Hannah, there is no reason to feel lost, for Nothing is ever really lost, or can be lost, No birth, identity, form--no object of the world, Nor life, nor force, nor any visible thing;... The body, sluggish, aged, cold--the embers left from earlier fires, ... shall duly flame again;"
2796	She thinks about what I have said for a moment.
2797	In the silence, I look toward the window and notice that the rain has stopped now.
2798	Sunlight is beginning to filter into her room.
2799	She asks: "Did you write that?"
2800	"No, that was Walt Whitman." "Who?"

2801	"A lover of words, a shape"
2802	"A lover of words, a shaper of thoughts."
2803	She does not respond directly.
2804	Instead she stares at me for a long while, until our breathing coincides. In. Out. In. Out. In. Out.
2805	Deep breaths.
2806	I wonder if she knows I think she's beautiful.
2807	"Would you stay with me a while?" she finally asks.
2808	I smile and nod.
2809	She smiles back.
2810	She stares at the hardened knots that deform my fingers and caresses them gently.
2811	Her hands are still those of an angel.
2812	"Come," I say as I stand with great effort, "let's go for a wal.
2813	The air is crisp and the goslings are waiting.
2814	It's beautiful today."
2815	I am staring at her as I say these last few words.
2816	She blushes.
2817	It makes me feel young again.
2818	She was famous, of course.
2819	One of the best southern painters of the twentieth century, some said, and I was, and am, proud of her.
2820	Unlike me, who struggled to write even the simplest of verses, my wife could create beauty as easily as the Lord created the earth.
2821	Her paintings are in museums around the world, but I have kept only two for myself.
2822	The first one she ever gave me and the last one.
2823	They hang in my room, and late at night I sit and stare and sometimes cry when I look at them.
2824	I don't know why.
2825	And so the years passed.
2826	We led our lives, working, painting, raising children, loving each other.
2827	I see photos of Christmases, family trips, of graduations and of weddings.
2828	I see grandchildren and happy faces.
2829	I see photos of us, our hair growing whiter, the lines in our faces deeper.
2830	A lifetime that seems so typical, yet uncommon.
2831	We could not foresee the future, but then who can?
2832	I do not live now as I expected to.
2833	And what did I expect? Retirement.
2834	Visits with the grandchildren, perhaps more travel.
2835	She always loved to travel.
2836	I thought that perhaps I would start a hobby, what I did not know, but possibly shipbuilding.

2837	In bottles. Small, detailed, impossible to consider now with my hands.
2838	But I am not bitter.
2839	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 in our lives.
2840	Looking back, I suppose it seems obvious, but at first, I thought her confusion understandable and not unique.
2841	She would forget where she placed her keys, but who has not done that? She would forget a neighbor's name, but not someone we knew well or with whom we socialized.
2842	Sometimes she would write the wrong year when she made out her checks, but again I dismissed it as simple mistakes that one makes when thinking of other things.
2843	It was not until the more obvious events occurred that I began to suspect the worst.
2844	An iron in the freezer, clothes in the dishwasher, books in the oven.
2845	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.
2846	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?"
2847	Please help me."
2848	A knot twisted in my stomach, but I dared not think the worst.
2849	Six days later the doctor met with her and began a series of tests.
2850	I did not understand them then and I do not understand them now, but I suppose it is because I am afraid to know.
2851	She spent almost an hour with Dr. Barnwell, and she went back the next day.
2852	That day was the longest day I ever spent.
2853	I looked through magazines I could not read and played.
2854	games I did not think about.
2855	Finally, he called us both into his office and sat us down.
2856	She held my arm confidently, but I remember clearly that my own hands were shaking.
2857	"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"
2858	My mind went blank, and all I could think about was the light that glowed above our Heads.
2859	The words echoed in my head: the early stages of Alzheimer's...
2860	My world spun in circles, and I felt her grip tighten on my arm.
2861	She whispered, almost to herself: "Oh, Noah... Noah."
2862	And as the tears started to fall, the word came back to me again... Alzheimer's...
2863	It is a barren disease, as empty and lifeless as a desert.
2864	It is a thief of hearts and souls and memories.
2865	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.
2866	The doctor was grim.
2867	He was a good man, and this was hard for him.
2868	He was younger than my youngest, and I felt my age in his presence.

2869	My mind was confused, my love was shaking, and the only thing I could think was: No drowning man can know which drop of water his last breath did stop...
2870	A wise poet's words, yet they brought me no comfort.
2871	I don't know what they meant or why I thought of them.
2872	We rocked* to and from*, and Allie, my dream, my timeless beauty, told me she was sorry.
2873	I knew there was nothing to forgive, and I whispered in her ear.
2874	"Everything will be fine," I whispered, but inside I was afraid.
2875	I was a hollow man with nothing to offer, empty as a junked stovepipe.
2876	I remember only bits and pieces of Dr. Barnwell's continuing explanation.
2877	"It's a degenerative brain disorder affecting memory and personality there is no cure or therapy..."
2878	There's no way to tell how fast it will progress....
2879	it differs from person to person...
2880	I wish I knew more...
2881	Some days will be better than others It will grow worse with the pas-sage of time I'm sorry to be the one who has to tell you.
2882	I'm sorry...
2883	I'm sorry...
2884	I'm sorry...Everyone was sorry.
2885	My children were brokenhearted, my friends were scared for themselves.
2886	I don't remember leaving the doctor's office, and I don't remember driving home.
2887	My memories of that day are gone, and in this my wife and I are the same.
2888	It has been four years now.
2889	Since then we have made the best of it, if that is possible.
2890	Allie organized, as was her disposition.
2891	She made arrangements to leave the house and move here.
2892	She rewrote her will and sealed it.
2893	She left specific burial instructions, and they sit in my desk, in the bottom drawer.
2894	I have not seen them.
2895	And when she was finished, she began to write.
2896	Letters to friends and children.
2897	Letters to brothers and sisters and cousins.
2898	Letters to nieces, nephews, and neighbors.
2899	And a letter to me.
2900	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.
2901	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.
2902	She was right; I find I enjoy reading bits and pieces of them just as she used to.

2903	They intrigue me, these letters, for when I sift through them, I realize that romance and passion are possible at any age
2904	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.
2905	I read them last three evenings ago, long after I should have been asleep.
2906	It was almost two o'clock when I went to the desk and found the stack of letters, thick and tall and weathered.
2907	I untied the ribbon, itself almost half a century old, and found the letters her mother had hidden so long ago and those from afterward.
2908	A lifetime of letters, letters professing my love, letters from my heart.
2909	I glanced through them with a smile on my face, picking and choosing, and finally opened a letter from our first anniversary.
2910	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.
2911	No man is more blessed than me, and I love you with all my heart.
2912	I put it aside, sifted through the stack, and found another, this from a cold evening thirty-nine years ago.
2913	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 more lucky than me.
2914	And after our son died, the one who resembled his mother...
2915	It was the hardest time we ever went through, and the words still ring true today: In times of grief and sorrow!
2916	will hold you and rock you, and take your grief and make it my own.
2917	When you cry, I cry, and when you hurt, I hurt.
2918	And together we will try to hold back the floods of tears and despair and make it through the potholed streets of life.
2919	I pause for just a moment, remembering him.
2920	He was four years old at the time, just a baby.
2921	I have lived twenty times as long as he, but if asked, I would have traded my life for his.
2922	It is a terrible thing to outlive your child, a tragedy I wish upon no one.
2923	I do my best to keep the tears away, sift through some more to clear my mind, and find the next from our twentieth anniversary, something much easier to think about: When I see you, my darling, in the morning before showers or in your studio covered with paint with hair matted and tired eyes, I know that you are the most beautiful woman in the world.
2924	They went on, this correspondence of life and love, and I read dozens more, some painful, most heartwarming.
2925	By three o'clock I was tired, but I had reached the bottom of the stack.
2926	There was one letter remaining, the last one I wrote her, and by then I knew I had to keep going.
2927	I lifted the seal and removed both pages.

2928	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.
2929	It is a strange experience for me, for when I think of you and the life we have shared, there is much to remember.
2930	A lifetime of memories. But to put it into words?
2931	I do not know if I am able.
2932	I am not a poet, and yet a poem is needed to fully express the way I feel about you.
2933	So, my mind drifts, and I remember thinking about our life together as I made coffee this morning.
2934	Kate was there, and so was Jane, and they both became quiet when I walked in the kitchen.
2935	I saw they'd been crying, and without a word, I sat myself beside them at the table and held their hands.
2936	And do you know what I saw when I looked at them?
2937	I saw you from so long ago, the day we said good-bye.
2938	They resemble you and how you were then, beautiful and sensitive and wounded with the hurt that comes when something special is taken away.
2939	And for a reason I'm not sure I understand, I was inspired to tell them a story.
2940	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.
2941	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.
2942	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.
2943	That part of the story has never left me, even after all this time.
2944	Even though I wasn't there, you described it to me only once, and I remember marveling at the strength you showed that day.
2945	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.
2946	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.
2947	I know you cared for him.
2948	And his reaction proves to me he cared for you as well.
2949	No, he could not understand losing you, but, how could he?
2950	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.
2951	I know he was hurt and angry, and tried for almost an hour to change your mind, but when you stood firm and *sack, "I can't go back with you, I'm so sorry," he knew that your decision had been made.

2952	You said he simply nodded and the two of you sat together for a long time without speaking.
2953	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.
2954	And when he finally walked you to your car, you said he told you that I was a lucky man.
2955	He behaved as a gentleman would, and I understood then why your choice was so har.
2956	I remember that when I finished the story, the room was quiet until Kate finally stood to embrace me.
2957	"OH, Daddy," she said with tears in her eyes, and though I expected to answer their questions, they did not ask any.
2958	Instead, they gave me something much more special.
2959	For the next four hours, each of them told me how much we, the two of us, had meant to them growing up. One by one, they told stories about things I had long since forgotten.
2960	And by the end, I was crying because I realized how well we had done with raising them.
2961	I was so proud of them, and proud of you, and happy about the life we have led.
2962	And nothing will ever take that away.
2963	Nothing. I only wish you would have been here to enjoy it with me.
2964	After they left, I rocked in silence, thinking back on our life together.
2965	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.
2966	I do not know who I would have become had you never come back to me that day, but I have no doubt that I would have lived and died with regrets that thankfully I'll never know.
2967	I love you, Allie.
2968	I am who I am because of you.
2969	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.
2970	I will always be yours.
2971	And, my darling, you will always be mine.
2972	Noah, I put the pages aside and remember sitting with Allie on our porch when she read this letter for the first time.
2973	It was late afternoon, with red streaks cutting the summer sky, and the last remnants of the day were fading.
2974	The sky was slowly changing color, and as I was watching the sun go down, I remember thinking about that brief, flickering moment when day suddenly turns into night.
2975	Dusk, I realized then, is just an illusion, because the sun is either above the horizon or below it.
2976	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.

2977	How would it feel, I remember wondering, to be always together, yet forever apart? Looking back, I find it ironic that she chose to read the letter at the exact moment that question popped into my head. It is ironic, of course, because I know the answer now.
2978	I know what it's like to be day and night now; always together, forever apart.
2979	There is beauty where we sit this afternoon, Allie and I.
2980	This is the pinnacle of my life.
2981	They are here at the creek: the birds, the geese, my friends.
2982	Their bodies float on the cool water, which reflects bits and pieces of their colors and make them seem larger than they really are.
2983	Allie too is taken in by their wonder, and little by little we get to know each other again.
2984	"It's good to talk to you.
2985	I find that I miss it, even when it hasn't been that long."
2986	I am sincere and she knows this, but she is still wary.
2987	I am a stranger.
2988	"Is this something we do often?" she asks.
2989	"Do we sit here and watch the birds a lot? I mean, do we know each other well?"
2990	"Yes and no. I think everyone has secrets, but we have been acquainted for years."
2991	She looks to her hands, then mine.
2992	She thinks about this for a moment, her face at such an angle that she looks young again.
2993	We do not wear our rings.
2994	Again, there is a reason for this.
2995	She asks: "Were you ever married?" I nod. "Yes."
2996	"What was she like?"
2997	I tell the truth.
2998	"She was my dream.
2999	She made me who I am, and holding her in my arms was more natural to me than my own heartbeat.
3000	I think about her all the time.
3001	Even now, when I'm sitting here, I think about her.
3002	There could never have been another.
3003	She takes this in.
3004	I don't know how she feels about this.
3005	Finally, she speaks softly, "Of course. But I love many things. her voice angelic, sensual.
3006	I wonder if she knows I think these things.
3007	"Is she dead?"
3008	What is death? I wonder, but I do not say this. Instead I answer, "My wife is alive in my heart.
3009	And she always will be."
3010	"You still love her, don't you?"
3011	"Of course. But I love many things.

3012	I love to sit here with you.
3013	I love to share the beauty of this place with someone I care about.
3014	I love to watch the osprey swoop toward the creek and find its dinner.”
3015	She is quiet for a moment.
3016	She looks away so I can't see her face.
3017	It has been her habit for years.
3018	"Why are you doing this?"
3019	No fear, just curiosity. This is good.
3020	I know what she Means, but I ask anyway.
3021	"What?" "Why are you spending the day with me?"
3022	I smile.
3023	"I'm here because this is where I'm supposed to be.
3024	It's not complicated.
3025	Both you and I are enjoying ourselves.
3026	Don't dismiss my time with you--it's not wasted. It's what I want.
3027	I sit here and we talk and I think to myself, what could be better than what I am doing now?"
3028	She looks me in the eyes, and for a moment, just a moment, her eyes twinkle.
3029	A slight smile forms on her lips.
3030	"I like being with you, but if getting me intrigued is what you're after, you've succeeded.
3031	I admit I enjoy your company, but I know nothing about you.
3032	I don't expect you to tell me your life story, but why are you so mysterious?"
3033	"I read once that women love mysterious strangers.”
3034	"See, you haven't really answered the question.
3035	You haven't answered most of my questions.
3036	You didn't even tell me how the story ended this morning.”
3037	I shrug.
3038	We sit quietly for a while.
3039	Finally, I ask: "Is it true?"
3040	"Is what true?"
3041	"That women love mysterious strangers?"
3042	She thinks about this and laughs.
3043	Then she answers as I would: "I think some women do.”
3044	"Do you?"
3045	"Now don't go putting me on the spot.
3046	I don't know you well enough for that.”
3047	She is teasing me, and I enjoy it.
3048	We sit silently and watch the world around us.
3049	This has taken us a lifetime to learn.

3050	It seems only the old are able to sit next to one another and not say anything and still feel content.
3051	The young, brash and impatient, must always break the silence.
3052	It is a waste, for silence is pure.
3053	Silence is holy.
3054	It draws people together because only those who are comfortable with each other can sit without speaking.
3055	This is the great paradox.
3056	Time passes, and gradually our breathing begins to coincide just as it did this morning.
3057	Deep breaths, relaxed breaths, and there is a moment when she dozes off, like those comfortable with one another often do.
3058	I wonder if the young are capable of enjoying this. Finally, when she wakes, a miracle.
3059	"Do you see that bird?" She points to it, and I strain my eyes.
3060	It is a wonder I can see it, but I can because the sun is bright.
3061	I point, too.
3062	"Caspian stern," I say softly, and we devote our attention to it and stare as it glides over Brices Creek.
3063	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.
3064	She is right about my evasiveness.
3065	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.
3066	So, I limit myself and answer only what is asked, sometimes not too well, and I volunteer nothing.
3067	This is a split decision, both good and bad, but necessary, for with knowledge comes pain.
3068	To limit the pain, I limit my answers.
3069	There are days she never learns of her children or that we are married.
3070	I am sorry for this, but I will not change.
3071	Does this make me dishonest?
3072	Perhaps, but I have seen her crushed by the waterfall of information that is her life.
3073	Could I look myself in the mirror without red eyes and quivering jaw and know I have forgotten all that was important to me?
3074	I could not and neither can she, for when this odyssey began, this is how I began.
3075	Her life, her marriage, her children.
3076	Her friends and her work.
3077	Questions and answers in the game show format of This Is Your Life.
3078	The days were hard on both of us.
3079	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 worthwhile.

3080	She would stare at pictures of forgotten offspring, hold paintbrushes that inspired nothing, and read love letters that brought back no joy.
3081	She would weaken over the hours, growing paler, becoming bitter, and ending the day worse than when it began.
3082	Our days were lost, and so was she.
3083	And selfishly, so was I.
3084	So, I changed.
3085	I became Magellan or Columbus, an explorer in the mysteries of the mind, and I learned, bumbling and slow, but learning nonetheless what had to be done.
3086	And I learned what is obvious to a child.
3087	That life is simply a collection of little lives, each lived one day at a time.
3088	That each day should be spent finding beauty in flowers and poetry and talking to animals.
3089	That a day spent with dreaming and sunsets and refreshing breezes cannot be bettered.
3090	But most of all, I learned that life is about sitting on benches next to ancient creeks with my hand on her knee and sometimes, on good days, for falling in love.
3091	"What are you thinking?" she asks.
3092	It is now dusk.
3093	We have left our bench and are shuffling along lighted paths that wind their way around this complex.
3094	She is holding my arm, and I am her escort.
3095	It is her idea to do this.
3096	Perhaps she is charmed by me.
3097	Perhaps she wants to keep me from falling.
3098	Either way, I am smiling to myself.
3099	"I'm thinking about you."
3100	She makes no response to this except to squeeze my arm, and I can tell she likes what I said.
3101	Our life together has enabled me to see the clues, even if she does not know them herself
3102	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.
3103	She taps my arm and smiles.
3104	"You're a kind man with a loving heart.
3105	I hope I enjoyed you as much before as I do now."
3106	We walk some more.
3107	Finally, she says, "I have to tell you something."
3108	"Go ahead."
3109	"I think I have an admirer."
3110	"An admirer?" "I see."
3111	"You don't believe me?"
3112	"I believe you."

3113	"You should."
3114	"Why?"
3115	"Because I think it is you."
3116	I think about this as we walk in silence, holding each other, past the rooms, past the courtyard
3117	We come to the garden, mainly wildflowers, and I stop her.
3118	I pick a bundle--red, pink, yellow, violet.
3119	I give them to her, and she brings them to her nose.
3120	She smells them with eyes closed and she whispers, "They're. beautiful."
3121	We resume our walk, me in one hand, the flowers in another.
3122	People watch us, for we are a walking miracle, or so I am told.
3123	It is true in a way, though most times I do not feel lucky.
3124	"You think it's me?"
3125	I finally ask.
3126	"Yes." "Why?" "Because I have found what you have hidden."
3127	"What?" "This," she says, handing a small slip of paper to me.
3128	"I found it under my pillow."
3129	"Are there more?" I ask.
3130	"Are there more?" I ask.
3131	"I found this in the pocket of my coat."
3132	Our souls were one, if you must know and never shall they be apart; With splendid dawn, your face aglow I reach for you and find my heart.
3133	"I see," and that is all I say.
3134	We walk as the sun sinks lower in the sky.
3135	In time, silver twilight is the only remainder of the day, and still we talk of the poetry.
3136	She is enthralled by the romance.
3137	By the time we reach the doorway, I am tired.
3138	She knows this, so she stops me with her hand and makes me face her..
3139	I do and I realize how hunched over I have become.
3140	She and I are now level.
3141	Sometimes I am glad she doesn't know how much I have changed.
3142	She turns to me and stares for a long time.
3143	"What are you doing?" I ask.
3144	"I don't want to forget you or this day, and I'm trying to keep your memory alive."
3145	Will it work this time?
3146	I wonder, then know it will not.
3147	It can't.
3148	I do not tell her my thoughts, though.
3149	I smile instead because her words are sweet.
3150	"Thank you," I say.
3151	"I mean it.

3152	I don't want to forget you again.
3153	You're very special to me.
3154	I don't know what I would have done without you today."
3155	My throat closes a little.
3156	There is emotion behind her words, the emotions I feel whenever I think of her.
3157	I know this is why I live, and I love her dearly at this moment.
3158	How I wish I were strong enough to carry her in my arms to paradise.
3159	"Don't try to say anything," she tells me.
3160	"Let's just feel the moment."
3161	And I do, and I feel heaven.
3162	Her disease is worse now than it was in the beginning, though Allie is different from most.
3163	There are three others with the disease here, and these three are the sum of my practical experience with it.
3164	They, unlike Allie, are in the most advanced stages of Alzheimer's and are almost completely lost.
3165	They wake up hallucinating and confused.
3166	They repeat themselves over and over.
3167	Two of the three can't feed themselves and will die soon.
3168	The third has a tendency to wander and get lost.
3169	She was found once in a stranger's car a quarter mile away.
3170	Since then she has been strapped to the bed.
3171	All can be very bitter at times, and at other times they can be like lost children, sad and alone.
3172	Seldom do they recognize the staff or people who love them.
3173	It is a trying disease, and this is why it is hard for their children and mine to visit.
3174	Allie, of course, has her own problems, too, problems that will probably grow worse over time.
3175	She is terribly afraid in the mornings and cries inconsolably.
3176	She sees tiny people, like gnomes, I think, watching her, and she screams at them to get away.
3177	She bathes willingly but will not eat regularly.
3178	She is thin now, much too thin, in my opinion, and on good days I do my best to fatten her up.
3179	But this is where the similarity ends.
3180	This is why Allie is considered a miracle, because sometimes, just sometimes, after I read to her, her condition isn't so bad.
3181	There is no explanation for this.
3182	"It's impossible," the doctors say.
3183	"She must not have Alzheimer's."
3184	But she does.
3185	On most days and every morning there can be no doubt.

3186	On this there is agreement.
3187	But why, then, is her condition different?
3188	Why does she sometimes change after I read?
3189	I tell the doctors the reason--I know it in my heart, but I am not believed.
3190	Instead they look to science.
3191	Four times specialists have traveled from Chapel Hill to find the answer.
3192	Four times they have left without understanding.
3193	I tell them, "You can't possibly understand it if you use only your training and your books," but they shake their heads and answer: "Alzheimer's does not work like this.
3194	With her condition, it's just not possible to have a conversation or improve as the day goes on. Ever."
3195	But she does.
3196	Not every day, not most of the time, and definitely less than she used to. But sometimes.
3197	And all that is gone on these days is her memory, as if she has amnesia.
3198	But her emotions are normal, her thoughts are normal.
3199	And these are the days that I know I am doing right.
3200	Dinner is waiting in her room when we return.
3201	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.
3202	The people here take care of everything.
3203	They are good to me, and I am thankful.
3204	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.
3205	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.
3206	She inhales slightly at the sight.
3207	Her eyes are wide.
3208	"Did you do this?"
3209	I nod and she walks in the room.
3210	"It looks beautiful."
3211	I offer my arm in escort and lead her to the window.
3212	She doesn't release it when we get there.
3213	Her touch is nice, and we stand close together on this crystal springtime evening.
3214	The window is open slightly, and I feel a breeze as it fans my cheek.
3215	The moon has risen, and we watch for a long time as the evening sky unfolds.
3216	"I've never seen anything so beautiful, I'm sure of it," she says, and I agree with her.
3217	"I haven't, either," I say, but I am looking at her.
3218	She knows what I mean, and I see her smile.
3219	A moment later she whispers: "I think I know who Allie went with at the end of the story," she says.
3220	You do?" "Who?" "She went with Noah."
3221	"You're sure?"

3222	"Absolutely." I smile and nod.
3223	"Yes, she did," I say softly, and she smiles back.
3224	Her face is radiant.
3225	I pull out her chair with some effort.
3226	She sits and I sit opposite her.
3227	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.
3228	Without speaking, I stare at her for a long time, living and reliving the moments of my life, remembering it all and making it real.
3229	I feel my throat begin to tighten, and once again I realize how much I love her.
3230	My voice is shaky when I finally speak.
3231	"You're so beautiful," I say.
3232	I can see in her eyes that she knows how I feel about her and what I really mean by my words.
3233	She does not respond.
3234	Instead she lowers her eyes and I wonder what she's thinking.
3235	She gives me no clues, and I gently squeeze her hand.
3236	I wait.
3237	With all my dreams, I know her heart, and I know I'm almost there.
3238	And then, a miracle that proves me right.
3239	As Glenn Miller plays softly in a candlelit room, I watch as she gradually gives in to the feelings inside her.
3240	I see a warm smile begin to form on her lips, the kind that makes it all worthwhile, and I watch as she raises her hazy eyes to mine.
3241	She pulls my hand toward her.
3242	"You're wonderful...", she says softly, trailing off, and at that moment she falls in love with me, too; this I know, for I have seen the signs a thousand times.
3243	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.
3244	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.
3245	I look around the room, then up to the ceiling, then back at Allie, and the way she's looking at me makes me warm.
3246	And suddenly I feel young again.
3247	I'm no longer cold or aching, or hunched over or deformed, or almost blind with cataract eyes.
3248	I'm strong and proud, and the luckiest man alive, and I keep on feeling that way for a long time across the table.
3249	By the time the candles have burned down a third, I am ready to break the silence.
3250	I say, "I love you deeply, and I hope you know that."
3251	"Of course, I do," she says breathlessly.
3252	"I've always loved you, Noah."

3253	Noah, I hear again. Noah.
3254	The word echoes in my head.
3255	Noah... Noah. She knows, I think to myself, she knows who I am She knows...
3256	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.
3257	She murmurs, "Noah... my sweet Noah..."
3258	And I, who could not accept the doctor's words, have triumphed again, at least for a moment.
3259	I give up the pretense of mystery, and I kiss her hand and bring it to my cheek and whisper in her ear.
3260	I say: "You are the greatest thing that has ever happened to me."
3261	"Oh . . . Noah," she says with tears in her eyes, "I love you, too."
3262	If only it would end like this, I would be a happy man.
3263	But it won't.
3264	Of this I'm sure, for as time slips by, I begin to see the signs of concern in her face.
3265	"What's wrong?" I ask, and her answer comes softly.
3266	"I'm so afraid.
3267	I'm afraid of forgetting you again.
3268	It isn't fair... I just can't bear to give this up."
3269	Her voice breaks as she finishes, but I don't know what to say.
3270	I know the evening is coming to an end, and there is nothing I can do to stop the inevitable.
3271	In this I am a failure.
3272	I finally tell her: "I'll never leave you.
3273	What we have is forever."
3274	She knows this is all I can do, for neither of us wants empty promises.
3275	But I can tell by the way she is looking at me that once again she wishes there were more.
3276	The crickets serenade us, and we begin to pick at our dinner.
3277	Neither one of us is hungry, but I lead by example and she follows me.
3278	She takes small bites and chews a long time, but I am glad to see her eat.
3279	She has lost too much weight in the past three months.
3280	After dinner, I become afraid despite myself.
3281	I know I should be joyous, for this reunion is the proof that love can still be ours, but I know the bell has tolled this evening.
3282	The sun has long since set and the thief is about to come, and there is nothing I can do to stop it.
3283	So, I stare at her and wait and live a lifetime in these last remaining moments.
3284	Nothing. The clock ticks. Nothing.
3285	I take her in my arms and we hold each other. Nothing.
3286	I feel her tremble and I whisper in her ear. Nothing.
3287	I tell her for the last time this evening that I love her.
3288	And the thief comes.
3289	It always amazes me how quickly it happens.

3290	Even now, after all this time.
3291	For as she holds me, she begins to blink rapidly and shake her head.
3292	Then, turning toward the corner of the room, she stares for a long time, concern etched on her face.
3293	No! my mind screams.
3294	Not yet! Not now... not when we're so close! Not tonight! Any night but tonight... Please!
3295	The words are inside me.
3296	I can't take it again! It isn't fair..., it isn't fair.
3297	But once again, it is to no avail.
3298	"Those people," she finally says, pointing, "are staring at me.
3299	Please make them stop."
3300	The gnomes. A pit rises in my stomach, hard and full.
3301	My breathing stops for a moment, then starts again, this time shallower.
3302	My mouth goes dry, and I feel my heart pounding.
3303	It is over, I know, and I am right.
3304	The sundowning has come.
3305	This, the evening confusion associated with Alzheimer's disease that affects my wife, is the hardest part of all.
3306	For when it comes, she is gone, and sometimes I wonder whether she and I will ever love again.
3307	"There's no one there, Allie," I say, trying to fend off the inevitable.
3308	She doesn't believe me.
3309	"They're staring at me."
3310	"No," I whisper while shaking my head.
3311	"You can't see them?"
3312	"No," I say, and she thinks for a moment.
3313	Well, they're right there," she says, pushing me away, "and they're staring at me."
3314	With that, she begins to talk to herself, and moments later, when I try to comfort her, she flinches with wide eyes.
3315	"Who are you?"
3316	she cries with panic in her voice, her face becoming whiter.
3317	"What are you doing here?"
3318	There is fear growing inside her, and I hurt, for there is nothing I can do.
3319	She moves farther from me, backing away, her hands in a defensive position, and then she says the most heartbreaking words of all.
3320	"Go away! Stay away from me!" she screams.
3321	She is pushing the gnomes away from her, terrified, now oblivious of my presence.
3322	I stand and cross the room to her bed.
3323	I am weak now, my legs ache, and there is a strange pain in my side.
3324	I don't know where it comes from.
3325	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.
3326	They will be here soon now, I know, and I wait for them.

3327	While I wait, I stare at my wife.
3328	Twenty... Thirty seconds pass, and I continue to stare, my eyes missing nothing, remembering the moments we just shared together.
3329	But in all that time she does not look back, and I am haunted by the visions of her struggling with unseen enemies.
3330	I sit by the bedside with an aching back and start to cry as I pick up the notebook.
3331	Allie does not notice.
3332	I understand, for her mind is gone.
3333	A couple of pages fall to the floor, and I bend over to pick them up.
3334	I am tired now, so I sit, alone and apart from my wife.
3335	And when the nurses come in, they see two people they must comfort.
3336	A woman shaking in fear from demons in her mind, and the old man who loves her more deeply than life itself, crying softly in the corner, his face in his hands.
3337	I spend the rest of the evening alone in my room.
3338	My door is partially open and I see people walk by, some strangers, some friends, and if I concentrate, I can hear them talking about families, jobs, and visits to parks. Ordinary conversations, nothing more, but I find that I envy them and the ease of their communication.
3339	Another deadly sin, I know, but sometimes I can't help it.
3340	Dr. Barnwell is here, too, speaking with one of the nurses, and I wonder who is ill enough to warrant such a visit at this hour.
3341	He works too much, I tell him.
3342	Spend the time with your family, I say, they won't be around forever.
3343	But he doesn't listen to me.
3344	He cares for his patients, he says, and must come here when called.
3345	He says he has no choice, but this makes him a man torn by contradiction.
3346	He wants to be a doctor completely devoted to his patients and a man completely devoted to his family.
3347	He cannot be both, for there aren't enough hours, but he has yet to learn this.
3348	I wonder, as his voice fades into the background, which he will choose or whether, sadly, the choice will be made for him.
3349	I sit by the window in an easy chair and I think about today.
3350	It was happy and sad, wonderful and heart-wrenching.
3351	My conflicting emotions keep me silent for many hours.
3352	I did not read to anyone this evening; I could not, for poetic introspection would bring me to tears.
3353	In time, the hallways become quiet except for the footfalls of evening soldiers.
3354	At eleven o'clock I hear the familiar sounds that for some reason I expected.
3355	The footsteps I know so well.
3356	Dr. Barnwell peeks in.
3357	"I noticed your light was on.
3358	Do you mind if I come in?"
3359	"No," I say, shaking my head.
3360	He comes in and looks around the room before taking a seat a few feet from me.

3361	"I hear," he says, "you had a good day with Allie."
3362	He smiles.
3363	He is intrigued by us and the relationship we have.
3364	I do not know if his interest is entirely professional.
3365	"I suppose so."
3366	He cocks his head at my answer and looks at me.
3367	"You okay, Noah?"
3368	You look a little down.
3369	"I'm fine. Just a little tired."
3370	"How was Allie today?"
3371	"She was okay.
3372	We talked for almost four hours."
3373	"Four hours? Noah, that's..., incredible."
3374	I can only nod.
3375	He goes on, shaking his head.
3376	"I've never seen anything like it, or even heard about it.
3377	I guess that's what love is all about.
3378	You two were meant for each other.
3379	She must love you very much.
3380	You know that, don't you?"
3381	"I know," I say, but I can't say anything more.
3382	"What's really bothering you, Noah?"
3383	Did Allie say or do something that hurt your feelings?"
3384	"No. She was wonderful, actually.
3385	It's just that right now I feel..., alone."
3386	"Alone?" "Nobody's alone."
3387	"I'm alone," I say as I look at my watch and think of his family sleeping in a quiet house, the place he should be, "and so are you."
3388	The next few days passed without significance.
3389	Allie was unable to recognize me at any time, and I admit my attention waned now and then, for most of my thoughts were of the day we had just spent.
3390	Though the end always comes too soon, there was nothing lost that day, only gained, and I was happy to have received this blessing once again.
3391	By the following week, my life had pretty much returned to normal.
3392	Or at least as normal as my life can be.
3393	Reading to Allie, reading to others, wandering the halls.
3394	Lying awake at night and sitting by my heater in the morning.
3395	I find a strange comfort in the predictability of my life.
3396	On a cool, foggy morning eight days after she and I had spent our day together, I woke early, as is my custom, and pattered around my desk, alternately looking at photographs and reading letters written many years before
3397	At least I tried to.

3398	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.
3399	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.
3400	I closed my eyes for a few minutes while my head alternately pounded and subsided.
3401	Then, opening them, I watched my old friend, the creek, roll by my window.
3402	Unlike Allie, I had been given a room where I could see it, and it has never failed to inspire me.
3403	It is a contradiction--this creek--a hundred thousand years old but renewed with each rainfall.
3404	I talked to it that morning, whispered so it could hear, "You are blessed, my friend, and I am blessed, and together we meet the coming days."
3405	The ripples and waves circled and twisted in agreement, the pale glow of morning light reflecting the world we share.
3406	The creek and I. Flowing, ebbing, receding.
3407	It is life, I think, to watch the water.
3408	A man can learn so many things.
3409	It happened as I sat in the chair, just as the sun first peeked over the horizon.
3410	My hand, I noticed, started to tingle, something it had never done before.
3411	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.
3412	I closed my eyes, then squeezed my lids tight.
3413	My hand stopped tingling and began to go numb, quickly, as if my nerves were suddenly severed somewhere on my lower arm.
3414	My wrist locked as 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.
3415	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.
3416	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.
3417	Just like me.
3418	And as my eyes closed for the final time, I thought to myself, Oh God, what have I done?
3419	I was unconscious on and off for days, and in those moments when I was awake, I found myself hooked to machines, tubes up my nose and down my throat and two bags of fluid hanging near the bed?
3420	I could hear the faint hum of machines, droning on and off, sometimes making sounds I could not recognize.
3421	One machine, beeping with my heart rate, was strangely soothing, and I found myself lulled to never-land time and time again.
3422	The doctors were worried.
3423	I could see the concern in their faces through squinted eyes as they scanned the charts and adjusted the machines.
3424	They whispered their thoughts, thinking I couldn't hear.
3425	"Strokes could be serious," they'd say, "especially for someone his age, and the consequences could be severe."
3426	Grim faces would prelude their predictions--"loss of speech, loss of movement, paralysis."

3427	Another chart notation, another beep of a strange machine, and they'd leave, never knowing I heard every word.
3428	I tried not to think of these things afterward but instead concentrated on Allie, bringing a picture of her to my mind whenever I could.
3429	I did my best to bring her life into mine, to make us one again.
3430	I tried to feel her touch, hear her voice, see her face, and when I did tears would fill my eyes because I didn't know if I would be able to hold her again, to whisper to her, to spend the day with her talking and reading and walking.
3431	This was not how I'd imagined, or hoped, it would end.
3432	I'd always assumed I would go last.
3433	This wasn't how it was supposed to be.
3434	I drifted in and out of consciousness for days until another foggy morning when my promise to Allie spurred my body once again.
3435	I opened my eyes and saw a room full of flowers, and their scent motivated me further.
3436	I looked for the buzzer, struggled to press it, and a nurse arrived thirty seconds later, followed closely by Dr. Barnwell, who smiled almost immediately.
3437	"I'm thirsty," I said with a raspy voice, and Dr. Barnwell smiled broadly.
3438	"Welcome back," he said, "I knew you'd make it."
3439	Two weeks later I am able to leave the hospital, though I am only half a man now.
3440	If I were a Cadillac, I would drive in circles, one wheel turning, for the right side of my body is weaker than the left.
3441	This, they tell me, is good news, for the paralysis could have been total.
3442	Sometimes, it seems, I am surrounded by optimists.
3443	The bad news is that my hands prevent me from using either cane or wheelchair, so I must now march to my own unique cadence to keep upright.
3444	Not left-right-left as was common in my youth, or even the shuffle-shuffle of late, but rather slow- shuffle, slide-the-right, slow-shuffle.
3445	I am an epic adventure now when I travel the halls.
3446	It is slow going even for me, this coming from a man who could barely outpace a turtle two weeks ago.
3447	It is late when I return, and when I reach my room, I know I will not sleep.
3448	I breathe deeply and smell the springtime fragrances that filter through my room.
3449	The window has been left open, and there is a slight chill in the air.
3450	I find that I am invigorated by the change in temperature.
3451	Evelyn, one of the many nurses here who is one-third my age, helps me to the chair that sits by the window and begins to close it.
3452	I stop her, and though her eyebrows rise, she accepts my decision.
3453	I hear a drawer open, and a moment later a sweater is draped over my shoulders.
3454	She adjusts it as if I were a child, and when she is finished, she puts her hand on my shoulder and pats it gently.
3455	She says nothing as she does this, and by her silence I know that she is staring out the window.
3456	She does not move for a long time, and I wonder what she is thinking, but I do not ask.
3457	Eventually I hear her sigh.
3458	She turns to leave, and as she does, she stops, leans forward, and then kisses me on the cheek, tenderly, the way my granddaughter does.

3459	I am surprised by this, and she says quietly, "It's good to have you back.
3460	Allie's missed you and so have the rest of us.
3461	We were all praying for you because it's just not the same around here when you're gone."
3462	She smiles at me and touches my face before she leaves.
3463	I say nothing.
3464	Later I hear her walk by again, pushing a cart, talking to another nurse, their voices hushed.
3465	The stars are out tonight, and the world is glowing an eerie blue.
3466	The crickets are singing, and their sound drowns out everything else.
3467	As I sit, I wonder if anyone outside can see me, this prisoner of flesh.
3468	I search the trees, the courtyard, the benches near the geese, looking for signs of life, but there is nothing.
3469	Even the creek is still.
3470	In the darkness it looks like empty space, and I find that I'm drawn to its mystery.
3471	I watch for hours, and as I do, I see the reflection of clouds as they begin to bounce off the water.
3472	A storm is coming, and in time the sky will turn silver, like dusk again.
3473	Lightning cuts the wild sky, and I feel my mind drift back.
3474	Who are we, Allie and I?
3475	Are we ancient ivy on a cypress tree, tendrils and branches intertwined so closely that we would both die if we were forced apart?
3476	I don't know.
3477	Another bolt and the table beside me is lit enough to see a picture of Allie, the best one I have.
3478	I had it framed years ago in the hope that the glass would make it last forever.
3479	I reach for it and hold it inches from my face.
3480	I stare at it for a long time, I can't help it.
3481	She was forty-one when it was taken, and she had never been more beautiful.
3482	There are so many things I want to ask her, but I know the picture won't answer, so I put it aside.
3483	Tonight, with Allie down the hall, I am alone.
3484	I will always be alone.
3485	This I thought as I lay in the hospital.
3486	This I'm sure of as I look out the window and watch the storm clouds appear.
3487	Despite myself I am saddened by our plight, for I realize that the last day we were together I never kissed her lips.
3488	Perhaps I never will again.
3489	It is impossible to tell with this disease.
3490	Why do I think such things?
3491	I finally stand and walk to my desk and turn on the lamp.
3492	This takes more effort than I think it will, and I am strained, so I do not return to the window seat.
3493	I sit down and spend a few minutes looking at the pictures that sit on my desk.
3494	Family pictures, pictures of children and vacations.
3495	Pictures of Allie and me.

3496	I think back to the times we shared together, alone or with family, and once again I realize how ancient I am.
3497	I open a drawer and find the flowers I'd once given her long ago, old and faded and tied together with ribbon.
3498	They, like me, are dry and brittle and difficult to handle without breaking.
3499	But she saved them.
3500	"I don't understand what you want with them," I would say, but she would just ignore me.
3501	And sometimes in the evenings I would see her holding them, almost reverently, as if they offered the secret of life itself. Women.
3502	Since this seems to be a night of memories, I look for and find my wedding ring.
3503	It is in the top drawer, wrapped in tissue.
3504	I cannot wear it anymore because my knuckles are swollen and my fingers lack for blood.
3505	I unwrap the tissue and find it unchanged.
3506	It is powerful, a symbol, a circle, and I know, I know, there could never have been another.
3507	I knew it then, and I know it now.
3508	And in that moment, I whisper aloud, "I am still yours, Allie, my queen, my timeless beauty.
3509	You are, and always have been, the best thing in my life."
3510	I wonder if she hears me when I say this, and I wait for a sign.
3511	But there is nothing.
3512	It is eleven-thirty and I look for the letter she wrote me, the one I read when the mood strikes me.
3513	I find it where I last left it.
3514	I turn it over a couple of times before I open it, and when I do my hands begin to tremble.
3515	Finally, I read: Dear Noah, I write this letter by candlelight as you lie sleeping in the bedroom we have shared since the day we were married.
3516	And though I can't hear the soft sounds of your slumber, I know you are there, and soon I will be lying next to you again as I always have.
3517	And I will feel your warmth and your comfort, and your breaths will slowly guide me to the place where I dream of you and the wonderful man you are.
3518	I see the flame beside me and it reminds me of another fire from decades ago, with me in your soft clothes and you in your jeans.
3519	I knew then we would always be together, even though I wavered the following day.
3520	My heart had been captured, roped by a southern poet, and I knew inside that it had always been yours.
3521	Who was I to question a love that rode on shooting stars and roared like crashing waves?
3522	For that is what it was between us then and that is what it is today.
3523	I remember coming back to you the next day, the day my mother visited.
3524	I was so scared, more scared than I had ever been because I was sure you would never forgive me for leaving you.
3525	I was shaking as I got out of the car, but you took it all away with your smile and the way you held your hand out to me.
3526	"How 'bout some coffee," was all you said.
3527	And you never brought it up again. In all our years together.

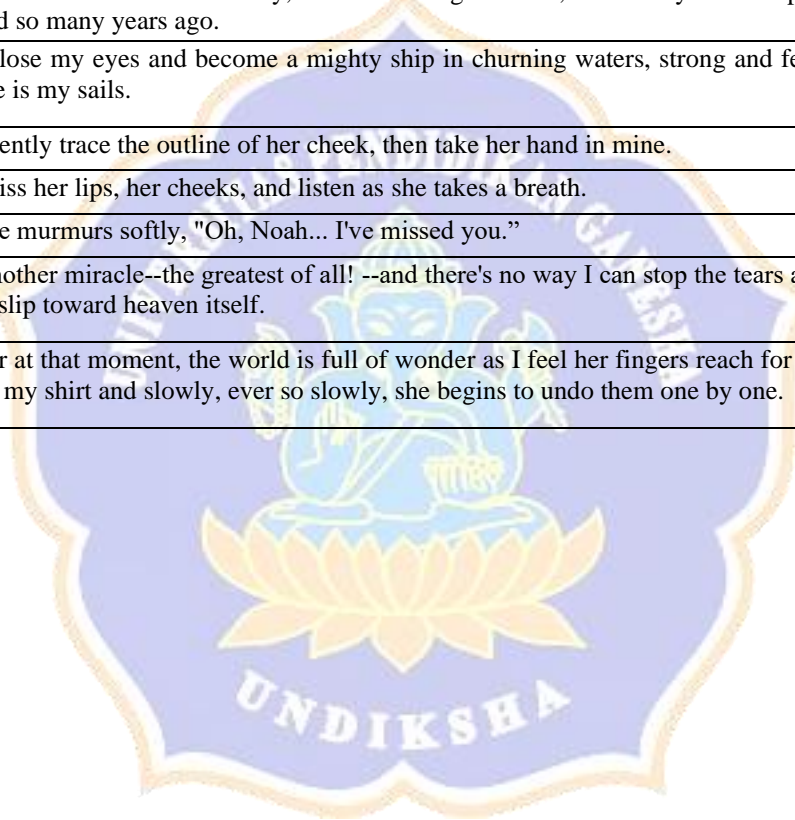
3528	Nor did you question me when I would leave and walk alone the next few days.
3529	And when I came in with tears in my eyes, you always knew whether I needed you to hold me or to just let me be.
3530	I don't know how you knew, but you did, and you made it easier for me.
3531	Later when we went to the small chapel and traded our rings and made our vows, I looked in your eyes and knew I had made the right decision.
3532	But more than that, I knew I was foolish forever considering someone else.
3533	I have never wavered since.
3534	We had a wonderful life together, and I think about it a lot now.
3535	I close my eyes sometimes and see you with speckles of gray in your hair, sitting on the porch and playing your guitar while little ones play and clap to the music you create.
3536	Your clothes are stained from hours of work and you are tired, and though I offer you time to relax, you smile and say, "That what I am doing now."
3537	I find your love for our children very sensual and exciting.
3538	"You're a better father than you know," I tell you later, after the children are sleeping.
3539	Soon after, we peel off our clothes and kiss each other and almost lose ourselves before we are able to slip between the flannel sheets.
3540	I love you for many things, especially your passions, for they have always been those things which are most beautiful in life.
3541	Love and poetry and fatherhood and friendship and beauty and nature.
3542	And I am glad you have taught the children these things, for I know their lives are better for it.
3543	They tell me how special you are to them, and every time they do, it makes me feel like the luckiest woman alive.
3544	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.
3545	My works hang in museums and private collections now, and though there have been times when I was frazzled and distracted because of shows and critics, you were always there with kind words, encouraging me.
3546	You understood my need for my own studio, my own space, and saw beyond the paint on my clothes and in my hair and sometimes on the furniture.
3547	I know it was not easy.
3548	It takes a man to do that, Noah, to live with something like that.
3549	And you have. For forty-five years now. Wonderful years.
3550	You are my best friend as well as my lover, and I do not know which side of you I enjoy the most.
3551	I treasure each side, just as I have treasured our life together.
3552	You have something inside you, Noah, something beautiful and strong.
3553	Kindness, that's what I see when I look at you now, that's what everyone sees.
3554	Kindness. You are the most forgiving and peaceful man I know.
3555	God is with you, He must be, for you are the closest thing to an angel that I've ever met.
3556	I know you thought 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.
3557	And though you asked, I never told you why, but now I think it is time you knew.
3558	We have lived a lifetime most couples never know, and yet, when I look at you, I am frightened by the knowledge that all this will be ending soon.
3559	For we both know my prognosis and what it will mean to us.

3560	I see your tears and I worry more about you than I do about me, because I fear the pain I know you will go through.
3561	There are no words to express my sorrow for this, and I am at a loss for words.
3562	So, 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.
3563	And this is where the story comes in.
3564	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 about us.
3565	And perhaps, just perhaps, we will find a way to be together again.
3566	Please don't be angry with me on days I do not remember you, and we both know they will come.
3567	Know that I love you, that I always will, and that no matter what happens, know I have led the greatest life possible.
3568	My life with you. And if you save this letter to read again, then believe what I am writing for you now.
3569	Noah, wherever you are and whenever this is, I love you.
3570	I love you now as I write this, and I love you now as you read this.
3571	And I am so sorry if I am not able to tell you.
3572	I love you deeply, my husband.
3573	You are, and always have been, my dream.
3574	Allie When I am finished with the letter, I put it aside.
3575	I rise from my desk and find my slippers.
3576	They are near my bed, and I must sit to put them on.
3577	Then, standing, I cross the room and open my door.
3578	I peek down the hall and see Janice seated at the main desk.
3579	At least I think it is Janice.
3580	I must pass this desk to get to Allie's room, but at this hour I am not supposed to leave my room, and Janice has never been one to bend the rules.
3581	Her husband is a lawyer.
3582	I wait to see if she will leave, but she does not seem to be moving, and I grow impatient.
3583	I finally exit my room anyway, slow-shuffle, slide-the-right, slow-shuffle.
3584	It takes aeons to close the distance, but for some reason she does not see me approaching.
3585	I am a silent panther creeping through the jungle, I am as invisible as baby pigeons.
3586	In the end I am discovered, but I am not surprised.
3587	I stand before her.
3588	"Noah," she says, "what are you doing?" "I'm taking a walk," I say.
3589	"I can't sleep."
3590	"You know you're not supposed to do this."
3591	"I know."
3592	I don't move, though.
3593	I am determined.
3594	"You're not really going for a walk, are you?"
3595	You're going to see Allie."
3596	"Yes," I answer.

3597	"Noah, you know what happened the last time you saw her at night."
3598	"I remember."
3599	"Then you know you shouldn't be doing this."
3600	I don't answer directly.
3601	Instead I say, "I miss her."
3602	"I know you do, but I can't let you see her."
3603	"It's our anniversary," I say.
3604	This is true.
3605	It is one year before gold.
3606	Forty-nine years today.
3607	"I see."
3608	"Then I can go?"
3609	She looks away for a moment, and her voice changes.
3610	Her voice is softer now, and I am surprised.
3611	She has never struck me as the sentimental type.
3612	"Noah, I've worked here for five years and I worked at another home before that.
3613	I've seen hundreds of couples struggle with grief and sadness, but I've never seen anyone handle it like you do.
3614	No one around here, not the doctors, not the nurses, has ever seen anything like it."
3615	She pauses for just a moment, and strangely, her eyes begin to fill with tears.
3616	She wipes them with her finger and goes on: "I try to think what it's like for you, how you keep going day after day, but I can't even imagine it.
3617	I don't know how you do it.
3618	You even beat her disease sometimes.
3619	Even though the doctors don't understand it, we nurses do.
3620	It's love, it's as simple as that.
3621	It's the most incredible thing I've ever seen."
3622	A lump has risen in my throat, and I am speechless.
3623	"But Noah, you're not supposed to do this, and I can't let you.
3624	So go back to your room."
3625	Then, smiling softly and sniffing and shuffling some papers on the desk, she says: "Me, I'm going downstairs for some coffee.
3626	I won't be back to check on you for a while, so don't do anything foolish."
3627	She rises quickly, touches my arm, and walks toward the stairs.
3628	She doesn't look back, and suddenly I am alone.
3629	I don't know what to think.
3630	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.
3631	I am warm for the first time in years as I begin my trek to Allie's room.
3632	I take steps the size of Pixie straws, and even at that pace it is dangerous, for my legs have grown tired already.
3633	I find I must touch the wall to keep from falling down.

3634	Lights buzz overhead, their fluorescent glow making my eyes ache, and I squint a little.
3635	I walk by a dozen darkened rooms, rooms where I have read before, and I realize I miss the people inside.
3636	They are my friends, whose faces I know so well, and I will see them all tomorrow.
3637	But not tonight, for there is no time to stop on this journey.
3638	I press on, and the movement forces blood through banished arteries.
3639	I feel myself becoming stronger with every step.
3640	I hear a door open behind me, but I don't hear footsteps, and I keep going.
3641	I am a stranger now.
3642	I cannot be stopped.
3643	A phone rings in the nurses' station, and I push forward so I will not be caught.
3644	I am a midnight bandit, masked and fleeing on horseback from sleepy desert towns, charging into yellow moons with gold dust in my saddlebags.
3645	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.
3646	Who am I kidding?
3647	I lead a simple life now.
3648	I am foolish, an old man in love, a dreamer who dreams of nothing but reading to Allie and holding her whenever I can.
3649	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.
3650	When I finally reach her room, my body is weak.
3651	My legs wobble, my eyes are blurred, and my heart is beating funny inside my chest.
3652	I struggle with the knob, and in the end, it takes two hands and three truckloads of effort.
3653	The door opens and light from the hallway spills in, illuminating the bed where she sleeps.
3654	I think, as I see her, I am nothing but a passerby on a busy city street, forgotten forever.
3655	Her room is quiet, and she is lying with the covers halfway up.
3656	After a moment I see her roll to one side, and her noises bring back memories of happier times.
3657	She looks small in her bed, and as I watch her, I know it is over between us.
3658	The air is stale and I shiver.
3659	This place has become our tomb.
3660	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.
3661	Besides, it is written on the slip of paper that I will slide under her pillow.
3662	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
3663	I think I hear someone coming, so I enter her room and close the door behind me.
3664	Blackness descends and I cross her floor from memory and reach the window.
3665	I open the curtains, and the moon stares back, large and full, the guardian of the evening.
3666	I turn to Allie and dream a thousand dreams, and though I know I should not, I sit on her bed while I slip the note beneath her pillow.

3667	Then I reach across and gently touch her face, soft like powder.
3668	I stroke her hair, and my breath is taken away.
3669	I feel wonder, I feel awe, like a composer first discovering the works of Mozart.
3670	She stirs and opens her eyes, squinting softly, and I suddenly regret my foolishness, for I know she will begin to cry and scream, for this is what she always does.
3671	I am impulsive and weak, this I know, but I feel an urge to attempt the impossible and I lean toward her, our faces drawing closer.
3672	And when her lips meet mine, I feel a strange tingling I have never felt before, in all our years together, but I do not pull back.
3673	And suddenly, a miracle, for I feel her mouth open and I discover a forgotten paradise, unchanged all this time, ageless like the stars.
3674	I feel the warmth of her body, and as our tongues meet, I allow myself to slip away, as I had so many years ago.
3675	I close my eyes and become a mighty ship in churning waters, strong and fearless, and she is my sails.
3676	I gently trace the outline of her cheek, then take her hand in mine.
3677	I kiss her lips, her cheeks, and listen as she takes a breath.
3678	She murmurs softly, "Oh, Noah... I've missed you."
3679	Another miracle--the greatest of all! --and there's no way I can stop the tears as we begin to slip toward heaven itself.
3680	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.



Appendix 02. Data Corpus of Liberal Feminism Characterization in Nicholas Sparks' *The Notebook*

No	Line	Sentences
		CHAPTER 1 MIRACLES
1	7	Eighty years, I think sometimes, and despite my own acceptance of my age, it still amazes me that I haven't been warm since George Bush was president.
2	21	The path is straight as ever, but now it is strewn with the rocks and gravel that accumulate over a lifetime.
3	57	I have always been a firm believer in God and the power of prayer, though to be honest, my faith has made for a list of questions I definitely want answered after I'm gone.
4	70	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.
5	71	And maybe, just maybe, it will.
		CHAPTER 2 GHOSTS
6	73	He liked to sit here in the evenings, especially after working hard all day, and let his thoughts wander without conscious direction.
7	75	He especially liked to look at the trees and their reflections in the river.
8	76	North Carolina trees are beautiful in deep autumn: greens, yellows, reds, oranges, every shade in between.
9	79	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.
10	83	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 when he had to.
11	84	He still had more work to do on it, especially 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 lumber delivered.
12	90	His muscles were tired and he knew he'd be a little sore tomorrow, but he was pleased that he had accomplished most of what he had wanted to do.
13	100	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.
14	101	It would work out for him, he knew; it always did.
15	138	There really wasn't anyone else, at least not since his father died last year.
16	139	He was an only child; his mother had died of influenza when he was two, and though he had wanted to at one time, he had never married.
17	140	But he had been in love once, that he knew.
18	141	Once and only once, and a long time ago.
19	142	And it had changed him forever.
20	143	Perfect love did that to a person, and this had been perfect.
21	160	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.

22	165	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.
23	166	He walked her home afterward, 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.
24	167	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.
25	181	I been watchin' you, workin' day and night, slavin' so hard you barely have time to catch your breath.
26	184	And with you, I knew you was tryin' to forget.
27	190	He saw her in Fort Totten Park, their place, every time he walked by.
28	191	Either sitting on the bench or standing by the gate, always smiling, blond hair softly touching her shoulders, her eyes the color of emeralds
29	192	When he sat on the porch at night with his guitar, he saw her beside him, listening quietly as he played the music of his childhood.
30	193	He felt the same when he went to Gaston's Drug Store, or to the Masonic theater, or even when he strolled downtown.
31	194	Everywhere he looked, he saw her image, saw things that brought her back to life.
32	229	The first waves of wounded young soldiers were coming home, and she spent her days with broken men and shattered bodies.
33	254	Like Lon, she had always been confident, even as a child.
34	255	She remembered that it had been a problem at times, especially when she dated, because it had intimidated most of the boys her age.
35	257	She turned it over in her hand a couple of times, thinking, you've come this far, don't give up now, and almost left then, but instead sat on the bed again.
36	265	She opened her pocketbook and thumbed through it until she came to a folded-up piece of newspaper.
37	266	After taking it out slowly, almost reverently, being careful not to rip it, she unfolded it and stared at it for a while.
38	282	After his mother died, he could remember spending his days in a dozen different homes, and for one reason or another, he stuttered badly as a child and was teased for it.
39	294	When he got a little older, he spent most of his weekends and vacations alone.
40	298	Although he was quiet, years of heavy lifting at the lumberyard helped him excel in sports, and his athletic success led to popularity.
41	417	"It's now or never," she whispered, then picked up her things and went to the door.
42	419	The manager smiled as she walked by, and she could feel his eyes on her as she left and went to her car.
43	421	She wasn't surprised that she still knew her way around town so well.
44	424	It was beautiful here in the low country, as it always had been.
45	442	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.
46	455	All she could think about was how special the day had been, how special he was, and as they started toward her house a few minutes later, he took her hand in his and she felt the way it warmed her the whole way back.
		CHAPTER 3 REUNION
47	470	Suddenly she felt guilty about showing up this way, without warning, and this made it harder.

48	475	He looked good, she thought.
49	476	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.
50	477	He was tan, 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.
51	479	"Hello, Noah. It's good to see you again."
52	487	She caught herself fighting for control.
53	488	She hadn't expected this to happen, didn't want it to happen.
54	489	She was engaged now.
	500	Her eyes brimmed with tears as they finally released each other.
55	501	She laughed nervously under her breath while wiping the tears from the corners of her eyes.
56	508	Noah smiled broadly.
57	509	"I'm glad you did."
58	510	He stepped back just a bit.
59	511	"God, you look fantastic.
60	512	You're even prettier now than you were then."
61	520	His questions brought her back to the present, making her realize what could happen if she wasn't careful.
62	521	Don't let this get out of hand, she told herself; the longer it goes on, the harder it's going to be.
63	522	And she didn't want it to get any harder.
64	550	She paused, then looked past him toward the house.
65	551	"You did a Wonderful job restoring it.
66	552	It looks perfect, just like I knew it would someday.
67	584	She let go of his hand, surprising him, and walked on with just enough distance between them so that they couldn't accidentally touch.
68	588	Traits like intelligence, confidence, strength of spirit, passion, traits that inspired others to greatness, traits he aspired to himself.
69	589	Allie had those traits, he knew, and as they walked now, he sensed them once again lingering beneath the surface.
70	606	"I'm engaged."
71	639	"I'm sorry," she said softly, knowing how much he had meant to Noah.
71	658	"Yeah. I never stopped.
72	659	I guess it's in my blood."
72	664	"You're still a poet, Noah Taylor Calhoun."
73	685	But for some reason, I had to do it in person." "Why?"
74	691	She answered automatically. "Yes, I love him."
75	699	"Her answer came almost too quickly.
76	700	"I'm making the right decision, Noah."
77	712	"To be honest, I'm still glad you came.
78	713	Despite everything. It's good to see you again."
79	718	I'd still like to be friends, even if you are engaged, and even if it is just for a couple of days.

80	737	She always loved evenings like this, evenings where the faint aroma of autumn leaves rode on the backs of soft southern winds.
81	750	As she walked, she looked around and realized she had forgotten how fresh and beautiful everything seemed here.
82	773	"It's so peaceful here," she 'said, her voice dreamlike.
83	802	For a second, he looked like a young man of seventeen again, and it made her pause a split second before going on.
84	803	Damn, she thought, get a hold of yourself.
85	804	Remember that you're engaged now.
86	808	She shook her head, amazed at how much he had done.
87	809	"It's unbelievable, Noah.
88	815	"No. I always thought I would when I was young, and I started that way.
89	816	But it was just too much.
90	817	It would have taken years, and so I ended up hiring some people..., actually a lot of people.
91	818	But even with them, it was still a lot of work, and most of the time I didn't stop until past midnight."
92	842	By his tone, she knew he was just making conversation.
93	843	Yet for some reason it made Her feel..., lonely.
94	875	"How's it going?" he asked, seeing she was almost finished.
95	876	"Good. I'm almost done here.
96	933	Maybe that's why my mother and I always seem to have a distance between us when we talk."
97	936	That it's wrong, that it isn't fair.
98	937	It was a terrible thing for a girl to learn.
99	938	That status is more important than feelings."
100	951	"It was wrong of her to do that, Noah, and I'm sorry she did.
101	952	But try to understand.
102	953	Once I left, she probably thought it would be easier for me to just let it go.
103	954	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
104	955	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."
105	978	"Lon's handsome, charming, and successful, and most of my friends are insanely jealous.
106	979	They think he's perfect, and in a lot of ways he is.
107	980	He's kind to me, he makes me laugh, and I know he loves me in his own way."
108	993	"Are you seeing anyone?"
109	994	"No," he answered, shaking his head.
110	1005	For a moment she wished she weren't engaged but then quickly cursed herself
111	1019	"I'm glad you came, Allie," he said.
112	1047	"It makes me feel alive when I look at it.
113	1048	Sometimes I have to get up and touch it.
114	1049	It's just so real--the shapes, the shadows, the colors.

115	1050	I even dream about it sometimes.
116	1051	It's incredible, Allie--I can stare at it for hours."
117	1060	I guess that once I got a little older, I began to think I was good at it.
118	1061	I enjoyed it, too.
119	1062	I remember working on this painting that summer, adding to it every day, changing it as our relationship changed.
120	1066	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 enjoying every minute.
121	1079	"You can still do it, Allie.
122	1080	I know you can.
123	1081	You have a talent that comes from inside you, from your heart, not from your fingers.
124	1082	What you have can't ever go away.
125	1083	It's what other people only dream about.
126	1084	You're an artist, Allie."
127	1085	The words were spoken with such sincerity that she knew he wasn't saying it just to be nice.
128	1086	He truly believed in her ability, and for some reason that meant more to her than she expected.
129	1158	"I'm sorry," she said.
130	1159	"I know he was a good friend of yours."
131	1175	"He had a crush on me, you know."
132	1191	Allie talked about going to college, painting, and her hours spent volunteering at the hospital.
133	1192	She talked about her family and friends and the charities she was involved with.
134	1218	"It's been quite a night," he said, his voice softer now.
135	1219	"Yes, it has," she said, "a wonderful night."
136	1234	"Talk like you did to me under the oak tree."
137	1235	And he did, reciting distant passages, toasting the night
138	1236	Whitman and Thomas, because he loved the images.
139	1237	Tennyson and Browning, because their themes felt so familiar.
140	1238	She rested her head against the back of the rocker, closing her eyes, growing just a bit warmer by the time he'd finished.
141	1239	It wasn't just the poems or his voice that did it.
142	1240	It was all of it, the whole greater than the sum of the parts.
143	1241	She didn't try to break it down, didn't want to, because it wasn't meant to be listened to that way.
144	1243	Because of him, she'd gone to a few poetry readings offered by the English department while in college.
145	1244	She'd sat and listened to different people, different poems, but had stopped soon after, discouraged that no one inspired her or seemed as inspired as true lovers of poetry should be.
146	1248	It had been years since she'd felt this way.
147	1249	Lon could not evoke these feelings in her.

148	1250	He never had and probably never would.
149	1251	Maybe that was why she had never been to bed with him.
150	1252	He had tried before, many times, using everything from flowers to guilt, and she had always used the excuse that she wanted to wait until marriage.
151	1259	She wanted something else, something different, something more.
152	1260	Passion and romance, perhaps, or maybe quiet conversations in candlelit rooms, or perhaps something as simple as not being second.
		CHAPTER 4 PHONE CALLS
153	1408	She'd always understood, but still, he cursed himself for not making the time.
154	1436	But she hadn't smiled.
155	1437	She was angry.
156	1438	And then Lon guessed that she had loved that person far more deeply than her mother had suggested.
157	1439	Maybe even more deeply than she loved him.
158	1450	And he made up his mind then not to lose her. He would do anything it took to keep her.
159	1451	He would do anything it took to keep her.
160	1452	She was everything he'd always needed, and he'd never find another quite like her.
		CHAPTER 5 KAYAKS AND FORGOTTEN DREAMS
161	1463	She'd had to sneak out 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.
162	1496	The morning haze he knew the stiffness noted that his legs were still hadn't burned off yet, and in his legs usually predicted rain.
163	1497	He looked to the western sky and saw storm clouds, thick and heavy, far off but definitely present.
164	1509	He finished his coffee, putting off the decision until later.
165	1517	God, what was it about her that made him feel this way?
166	1518	Even after all these years?
167	1519	What sort of power did she have over him?
168	1545	She didn't like to argue with him about it, mostly because she knew he was telling the truth.
169	1546	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 the time with her now.
170	1568	She sat at the desk and started working: nothing specific, just getting the feel of it again, letting shapes and colors flow from the memory of her youth.
171	1570	It was almost as if she'd never stopped.
172	1571	She examined it when she was finished, pleased with the effort.
173	1614	This was her time, and she wanted to spend it doing what she wanted.
174	1615	She hadn't planned on speaking to him until later, and for some reason she felt almost as if talking to him now would spoil the day.
		CHAPTER 6 MOVING WATER
175	1644	She looked more relaxed than yesterday, more confident, and again he felt a slight shock at seeing her.
176	1647	Allie met him halfway, carrying a small bag in one hand.

177	1648	She surprised him by kissing him gently on the cheek, her free hand lingering at his waist after she pulled back.
178	1668	She thought for a second while she looked around.
179	1669	When she spoke, her voice was determined.
180	1670	"Then we'll go.
181	1671	I don't care if it rains."
182	1683	"You're not even going to give me a hint?
183	1685	"I thought about it this morning.
184	1686	I remember it made me cry."
185	1690	"You are special," he finally said, and the way he said it made her wonder if he wanted to add something else.
186	1706	His sleeves' were rolled up, too, and she could see the muscles in his arms bulging slightly.
187	1707	His muscles were well developed there from paddling every morning.
188	1719	She felt her insides jump just a bit 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.
189	1728	Then, she said: "It's pretty out here.
190	1729	So clean. So quiet. It's almost like going back in time."
191	1759	But that summer has stayed with me and probably always will.
192	1760	I know it can't be the same between us, but that doesn't change the way I felt about you then."
193	1764	What you said was beautiful.
194	1765	It takes a poet to talk the way you do, and like I said, you're the only poet I've ever met."
195	1774	The shock at seeing the article, the sleepless nights, her short temper during daylight.
196	1775	Even yesterday she had been afraid and wanted to run away.
197	1776	The tension was gone now, every bit of it, replaced by something else, and she was glad about that as she rode in silence in the old red canoe.
198	1778	She had seen too many men in the past few years destroyed by war, or time, or even money.
199	1779	It took strength to hold on to inner passion, and Noah had done that.
200	1790	She had known it once before, and again she cursed herself for forgetting something as important as creating beauty.
201	1791	Painting was what she was meant to do, she was sure of that now.
202	1792	Her feelings this morning had confirmed it, and she knew that whatever happened, she was going to give it another shot.
203	1793	A fair shot, no matter what anyone said.
		CHAPTER 7 SWANS AND STORMS
204	1827	"Oh, Noah," she finally said softly, "it's beautiful."
205	1834	Noah brought out the bag of bread he'd brought earlier and handed it to Allie.
206	1835	She scattered the bread, favoring the little ones, laughing and smiling as they swam in circles, looking for food.
207	1850	Noah paddled hard as dark clouds rolled directly overhead.

208	1851	Soon rain began to fall, a light sprinkle at first, then gradually harder.
209	1859	Allie enjoyed the rain and leaned her head back for a moment to let it hit her face.
210	1860	She knew the front of her dress would soak through in a couple of minutes, but she 'didn't care.
211	1861	She did wonder, though, if he noticed, then thought he probably did.
212	1862	She ran her hands through her hair, feeling its wetness.
213	1863	It felt wonderful, she felt wonderful, everything felt wonderful.
214	1875	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.
215	1884	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.
216	1888	"I think I can find something here for you so you can get out of those clothes.
217	1889	It might be a little big, but it's warm."
218	1896	She thanked him with a smile and went up the stairs, feeling his eyes on her as she walked.
219	1910	When she was finished, she checked herself in the mirror, feeling pretty despite everything, and went back down the stairs.
220	1912	He didn't see her come in, and she watched him as he worked.
221	1913	He had changed his clothes as well and looked good: his shoulders broad, wet hair hanging just over his collar, jeans tight.
222	1914	He poked the fire, moving the logs, and added some more kindling.
223	1915	Allie leaned against the doorjamb, one leg crossed over the other, and continued to watch him.
224	1944	Crossing her legs, she adjusted the quilt until she was comfortable and watched the dancing flames.
225	1960	"I used to think about it all the time after I went home.
226	1961	I always thought about how you looked that night.
227	1962	It was the way I always remembered you."
228	1977	You were my first, and it was more wonderful than I ever thought it would be."
229	1990	I remember you had asked if I had a boyfriend, and when I said I did, you barely talked to me anymore."
230	1991	"I didn't want to get between the two of you."
231	2001	She spoke quietly: "Do you remember walking home after the festival?
232	2002	I asked you if you wanted to see me again.
233	2013	"I think I loved you more that summer than I ever loved anyone."
234	2035	I didn't believe that you were that way, I never did, but hearing it and thinking about all our differences made me wonder if maybe the summer meant more to me than it had meant to you....And then, while all this was going through my head, I heard from Sarah.
235	2043	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.
236	2044	But I never sent them for fear of what I might find.
237	2045	By then, you'd gone on with your life and I didn't want to think about you loving someone else.

238	2046	I wanted to remember us like we were that summer.
239	2047	I didn't want to ever lose that.”
240	2069	"I'm not saying it because I'm sweet.
241	2070	I'm saying it because I love you now and I always have.
242	2071	More than you can imagine.”
243	2089	"There's never been another, Noah.
244	2090	You weren't just the first.
245	2091	You're the only man I've ever been with.
246	2098	She was crying because they might never see each other again, and she wondered how she could ever be happy again.
247	2107	When I look at you, I see your beauty and grace and know they have grown stronger with every life you have lived.
248	2108	And I know I have spent every life before this one searching for you.
249	2181	When the lump in his throat subsided, he whispered to her, "You are the answer to every prayer I've offered.
250	2182	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.
251	2183	“I love you, Allie, more than you can ever imagine.
252	2184	I always have, and I always will.”
253	2185	"Oh, Noah," she said, pulling him to her.
254	2186	She wanted him, needed him now more than ever, like nothing she'd ever known.
		CHAPTER 8 COURTROOMS
255	2197	It's of a personal nature
256	2198	I know it's out of the ordinary, but I really need to take care of it.”
257	2211	But Mr. Hammond has never made a similar request before, and I assume the matter is very important to him.”
		CHAPTER 9 AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR
258	2276	He shook his head as he answered, his tone serious.
259	2277	"No, not really. It wasn't fair to me, and it wasn't fair to Allie.
260	2278	Otherwise she wouldn't be here.”
261	2304	Allie, though obviously worried, smiled at her mother.
262	2305	"Thank you," she said, and her mother reached for her hand.
263	2315	Allie turned away, her eyes reddening.
263	2316	A moment later a tear drifted down her cheek.
264	2317	"I don't know...," she trailed off, and her mother squeezed her hand.
265	2321	"Yes, I do," Allie answered softly, "very much.”
266	2322	"Do you love Lon.”
267	2323	"Yes, I do. I love him, too.
267	2339	Allie shook her head.
268	2340	"No, this is up to me.”
269	2347	They stood together for another minute, just holding each other.
270	2348	"Thanks for coming," Allie said.
271	2349	“I love you.”

272	2350	"I love you, too."
		CHAPTER 10 CROSSROADS
273	2358	She was a strong woman, he thought to himself, and he knew where Allie got it from.
274	2363	"I'm sorry," Allie said.
275	2364	"I had no idea this would happen."
276	2372	She shook her head.
277	2373	"No. Not really. I have to do this alone.
278	2386	The answer was that I wanted two things.
279	2387	First, I want you.
280	2388	I want us.
281	2389	I love you and I always have."
282	2390	She took a deep breath before going on.
283	2391	"But I also want a happy ending without hurting anyone.
	2392	And I know that if I stayed, people would be hurt.
284	2393	Especially Lon. I wasn't lying when I told you that I love him.
285	2394	He doesn't make me feel the same way you do, but I care for him, and this wouldn't be fair to him.
286	2399	"I know," she said, "but no matter what I choose I have to live with it.
287	2400	Forever. I have to be able to go forward and not look back anymore.
288	2401	Can you understand that?"
289	2422	Tears began to fill her eyes.
290	2423	"I don't know if I can," she finally whispered.
291	2427	What we have is rare.
292	2428	It's too beautiful to just throw it away."
293	2437	"Oh, Noah," she said as the tears began again, "please try to understand " He shook his head to stop her.
294	2443	She leaned into him and began to cry harder as Noah fought back his own tears.
295	2465	"It's beautiful, Allie.
296	2466	Thank you." He attempted a smile.
297	2467	"I told you that you were an artist."
298	2483	"Stay with me," Noah mouthed without sound, and this for some reason hurt more than Allie would have expected.
299	2484	The tears began to fall hard now, but she couldn't speak.
300	2485	Finally, reluctantly, she looked away and pulled her hand from his.
301	2500	He closed his eyes then and watched her leave once more, her car moving steadily away from him, taking his heart with her.
302	2501	But, like her mother, he realized sadly, she never looked back.
		CHAPTER 11 A LETTER FROM YESTERDAY
303	2502	Driving with tears in her eyes was difficult, but she went on anyway, hoping that instinct would take her back to the inn.
304	2505	She was tired, and she wondered if she would have the energy she needed to talk to Lon.
305	2506	And what was she going to say?

308	2507	She still had no idea but hoped that something would come to her when the time came.
309	2508	It would have to.
310	2512	Traffic was light, and she had time to watch strangers going about their business as she drove through New Bern.
311	2568	Once more, she imagined him writing it, and for a moment she debated reading another, but she knew she couldn't delay any longer.
312	2569	Lon was waiting for her.
		CHAPTER 12 WINTER FOR TWO
313	2577	I look to her now that I have finished, but she does not look back.
314	2578	Instead she is staring out the window at the courtyard, where friends and family meet.
315	2597	I have read to her this morning, as I do every morning, because it is something I must do.
316	2598	Not for duty--although I suppose a case could be made for this--but for another, more romantic, reason.
317	2602	The doctors tell me that I'm not allowed to see her after dark.
318	2603	I understand the reasons completely, and though I agree with them, I sometimes break the rules.
319	2604	Late at night when my mood is right, I will sneak from my room and go to hers and watch her while she sleeps.
320	2606	I'll come in and see her breathe and know that had it not been for her, I would never have married.
321	2609	Sometimes, when I am standing there, I think about how lucky I am to have been married to her for almost forty-nine years.
322	2631	I might tell them of her sweetness and her charm and describe how she taught me to see the world for the beautiful place it is.
323	2632	Or I tell them of our early years together and explain how we had all we needed when we held each other under starry southern skies.
323	2633	On special occasions I whisper of our adventures together, of art shows in New York and Paris or the rave reviews from critics writing in languages I do not understand.
324	2658	She is crying.
325	2659	I smile and release her hand, then reach in my pocket.
326	2660	I take out a handkerchief and wipe at her tears.
327	2661	She looks at me as I do so, and I wonder what she is thinking.
328	2662	"That was a beautiful story."
329	2676	"Yes," I say again, just as I do every time on days like these.
330	2677	I have learned to be patient.
	2687	She sits up a little in her bed and takes another, drink.
331	2688	Her body is still strong.
332	2693	She asks the obvious: "Well, which one did she finally marry?"
333	2694	I answer: "The one who was right for her."
334	2695	"Which one was that?"
335	2696	I smile.
336	2697	"You'll know," I say quietly, "by the end of the day."

337	2701	She is thinking of a way to ask me another question, though she isn't sure how to do it.
338	2702	Instead she chooses to put it off for a moment and reaches for one of the little paper cups.
339	2726	Finally, she turns to me and looks into my eyes.
340	2727	She offers a gentle smile, the kind you share with a child, not a lover.
341	2728	"I don't want to hurt your feelings because you've been so nice to me, but.."
342	2733	We have lived at Creek side Extended Care Facility for three years now.
343	2734	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.
344	2751	The doctors are worried about me, but I am not.
345	2752	I have no time for worry in this twilight of my life.
346	2772	"Duke," she whispers to herself, "Duke."
347	2773	She thinks for a moment, her forehead wrinkled, her eyes serious.
348	2778	My heart aches for her, and I wish for the thousandth time that there was something I could do.
349	2779	She says: "I'm sorry.
350	2780	I don't understand anything that's happening to me right now. Even you.
351	2781	When I listen to you talk, I feel like I should know you, but I don't.
352	2782	I don't even know my name.
353	2783	"She wipes at her tears and says, "Help me, Duke, help me remember who I am.
354	2784	Or at least, who I was.
355	2785	I feel so lost."
356	2789	"You are Hannah, a lover of life, a strength to those who shared in your friendships.
357	2790	You are a dream, a creator of happiness, an artist who has touched a thousand souls.
358	2792	You are kind and loyal, and you are able to see beauty where others do not.
359	2818	She was famous, of course.
360	2819	One of the best southern painters of the twentieth century, some said, and I was, and am, proud of her.
361	2820	Unlike me, who struggled to write even the simplest of verses, my wife could create beauty as easily as the Lord created the earth.
362	2821	Her paintings are in museums around the world, but I have kept only two for myself.
363	2822	The first one she ever gave me and the last one.
364	2845	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.
365	2846	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?"
366	2847	Please help me."
367	2856	She held my arm confidently, but I remember clearly that my own hands were shaking.
368	2861	She whispered, almost to herself: "Oh, Noah... Noah."
369	2862	And as the tears started to fall, the word came back to me again... Alzheimer's...
370	2863	It is a barren disease, as empty and lifeless as a desert.

371	2864	It is a thief of hearts and souls and memories.
372	2865	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.
373	2891	She made arrangements to leave the house and move here.
374	2892	She rewrote her will and sealed it.
375	2893	She left specific burial instructions, and they sit in my desk, in the bottom drawer.
376	2894	I have not seen them.
377	2895	And when she was finished, she began to write.
378	2896	Letters to friends and children.
379	2897	Letters to brothers and sisters and cousins.
380	2898	Letters to nieces, nephews, and neighbors.
381	2899	And a letter to me.
382	2901	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.
383	2902	She was right; I find I enjoy reading bits and pieces of them just as she used to.
384	2915	It was the hardest time we ever went through, and the words still ring true today: In times of grief and sorrow!
385	2916	will hold you and rock you, and take your grief and make it my own.
386	2917	When you cry, I cry, and when you hurt, I hurt.
387	2918	And together we will try to hold back the floods of tears and despair and make it through the potholed streets of life.
388	2938	They resemble you and how you were then, beautiful and sensitive and wounded with the hurt that comes when something special is taken away.
389	2944	Even though I wasn't there, you described it to me only once, and I remember marveling at the strength you showed that day.
390	2945	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.
391	2950	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.
392	2951	I know he was hurt and angry, and tried for almost an hour to change your mind, but when you stood firm and *sack, "I can't go back with you, I'm so sorry," he knew that your decision had been made.
393	2952	You said he simply nodded and the two of you sat together for a long time without speaking.
394	2959	For the next four hours, each of them told me how much we, the two of us, had meant to them growing up. One by one, they told stories about things I had long since forgotten.
395	2960	And by the end, I was crying because I realized how well we had done with raising them.
396	2961	I was so proud of them, and proud of you, and happy about the life we have led.
397	2962	And nothing will ever take that away.
398	2966	I do not know who I would have become had you never come back to me that day, but I have no doubt that I would have lived and died with regrets that thankfully I'll never know.
399	2986	I am sincere and she knows this, but she is still wary.

400	2987	I am a stranger.
401	3015	She is quiet for a moment.
402	3016	She looks away so I can't see her face.
403	3017	It has been her habit for years.
404	3030	"I like being with you, but if getting me intrigued is what you're after, you've succeeded.
405	3031	I admit I enjoy your company, but I know nothing about you.
406	3032	I don't expect you to tell me your life story, but why are you so mysterious?"
407	3034	"See, you haven't really answered the question.
408	3035	You haven't answered most of my questions.
409	3036	You didn't even tell me how the story ended this morning."
410	3065	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.
411	3066	So, I limit myself and answer only what is asked, sometimes not too well, and I volunteer nothing.
412	3067	This is a split decision, both good and bad, but necessary, for with knowledge comes pain.
413	3068	To limit the pain, I limit my answers.
414	3094	She is holding my arm, and I am her escort.
415	3095	It is her idea to do this.
416	3096	Perhaps she is charmed by me.
417	3097	Perhaps she wants to keep me from falling.
418	3103	She taps my arm and smiles.
419	3104	"You're a kind man with a loving heart.
420	3105	I hope I enjoyed you as much before as I do now."
421	3109	"I think I have an admirer."
422	3110	"An admirer?" "I see."
423	3111	"You don't believe me?"
424	3112	"I believe you."
425	3113	"You should."
426	3114	"Why?"
427	3115	"Because I think it is you."
428	3126	"Yes." "Why?" "Because I have found what you have hidden."
429	3127	"What?" "This," she says, handing a small slip of paper to me.
430	3128	"I found it under my pillow."
431	3131	"I found this in the pocket of my coat."
432	3151	"I mean it.
433	3152	I don't want to forget you again.
434	3153	You're very special to me.
435	3154	I don't know what I would have done without you today."
436	3159	"Don't try to say anything," she tells me.
437	3160	"Let's just feel the moment."

438	3163	There are three others with the disease here, and these three are the sum of my practical experience with it.
439	3164	They, unlike Allie, are in the most advanced stages of Alzheimer's and are almost completely lost.
440	3180	This is why Allie is considered a miracle, because sometimes, just sometimes, after I read to her, her condition isn't so bad.
441	3196	Not every day, not most of the time, and definitely less than she used to. But sometimes.
442	3197	And all that is gone on these days is her memory, as if she has amnesia.
443	3198	But her emotions are normal, her thoughts are normal.
444	3208	"Did you do this?"
445	3209	I nod and she walks in the room.
446	3210	"It looks beautiful."
447	3215	The moon has risen, and we watch for a long time as the evening sky unfolds.
448	3216	"I've never seen anything so beautiful, I'm sure of it," she says, and I agree with her.
449	3217	"I haven't, either," I say, but I am looking at her.
450	3218	She knows what I mean, and I see her smile.
451	3219	A moment later she whispers: "I think I know who Allie went with at the end of the story," she says.
452	3220	You do?" "Who?" "She went with Noah."
453	3221	"You're sure?"
454	3222	"Absolutely." I smile and nod.
455	3223	"Yes, she did," I say softly, and she smiles back.
456	3240	I see a warm smile begin to form on her lips, the kind that makes it all worthwhile, and I watch as she raises her hazy eyes to mine.
457	3241	She pulls my hand toward her.
458	3242	"You're wonderful...", she says softly, trailing off, and at that moment she falls in love with me, too; this I know, for I have seen the signs a thousand times.
459	3243	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.
460	3250	I say, "I love you deeply, and I hope you know that."
461	3251	"Of course, I do," she says breathlessly.
462	3252	"I've always loved you, Noah."
463	3266	"I'm so afraid.
464	3267	I'm afraid of forgetting you again.
465	3268	It isn't fair... I just can't bear to give this up."
466	3298	"Those people," she finally says, pointing, "are staring at me.
467	3299	Please make them stop."
467	3308	She doesn't believe me.
468	3309	"They're staring at me."
468	3310	"No," I whisper while shaking my head.
469	3311	"You can't see them?"
470	3312	"No," I say, and she thinks for a moment.

471	3313	Well, they're right there," she says, pushing me away, "and they're staring at me."
472	3315	"Who are you?"
473	3316	she cries with panic in her voice, her face becoming whiter.
474	3317	"What are you doing here?"
475	3319	She moves farther from me, backing away, her hands in a defensive position, and then she says the most heartbreaking words of all.
476	3320	"Go away! Stay away from me!" she screams.
477	3321	She is pushing the gnomes away from her, terrified, now oblivious of my presence.
478	3329	But in all that time she does not look back, and I am haunted by the visions of her struggling with unseen enemies.
479	3378	You two were meant for each other.
480	3379	She must love you very much.
481	3380	You know that, don't you?"
482	3381	"I know," I say, but I can't say anything more.
483	3428	I tried not to think of these things afterward but instead concentrated on Allie, bringing a picture of her to my mind whenever I could.
484	3429	I did my best to bring her life into mine, to make us one again.
485	3430	! tried to feel her touch, hear her voice, see her face, and when I did tears would fill my eyes because I didn't know if I would be able to hold her again, to whisper to her, to spend the day with her talking and reading and walking.
486	3497	I open a drawer and find the flowers I'd once given her long ago, old and faded and tied together with ribbon.
487	3498	They, like me, are dry and brittle and difficult to handle without breaking.
488	3499	But she saved them.
489	3500	"I don't understand what you want with them," I would say, but she would just ignore me.
490	3501	And sometimes in the evenings I would see her holding them, almost reverently, as if they offered the secret of life itself. Women.
491	3508	And in that moment, I whisper aloud, "I am still yours, Allie, my queen, my timeless beauty.
492	3509	You are, and always have been, the best thing in my life."
493	3518	I see the flame beside me and it reminds me of another fire from decades ago, with me in your soft clothes and you in your jeans.
494	3519	I knew then we would always be together, even though I wavered the following day.
495	3520	My heart had been captured, roped by a southern poet, and I knew inside that it had always been yours.
496	3523	I remember coming back to you the next day, the day my mother visited.
497	3524	I was so scared, more scared than I had ever been because I was sure you would never forgive me for leaving you.
498	3527	And you never brought it up again. In all our years together.
499	3528	Nor did you question me when I would leave and walk alone the next few days.
500	3529	And 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.
501	3530	I don't know how you knew, but you did, and you made it easier for me.

502	3531	Later when we went to the small chapel and traded our rings and made our vows, I looked in your eyes and knew I had made the right decision.
503	3532	But more than that, I knew I was foolish forever considering someone else.
504	3533	I have never wavered since.
505	3534	We had a wonderful life together, and I think about it a lot now.
506	3537	I find your love for our children very sensual and exciting.
507	3538	"You're a better father than you know," I tell you later, after the children are sleeping.
508	3542	And I am glad you have taught the children these things, for I know their lives are better for it.
509	3543	They tell me how special you are to them, and every time they do, it makes me feel like the luckiest woman alive.
510	3544	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.
511	3545	My works hang in museums and private collections now, and though there have been times when I was frazzled and distracted because of shows and critics, you were always there with kind words, encouraging me.
512	3546	You understood my need for my own studio, my own space, and saw beyond the paint on my clothes and in my hair and sometimes on the furniture.
513	3550	You are my best friend as well as my lover, and I do not know which side of you I enjoy the most.
514	3551	I treasure each side, just as I have treasured our life together.
515	3552	You have something inside you, Noah, something beautiful and strong.
516	3553	Kindness, that's what I see when I look at you now, that's what everyone sees.
517	3554	Kindness. You are the most forgiving and peaceful man I know.
518	3555	God is with you, He must be, for you are the closest thing to an angel that I've ever met.
519	3556	I know you thought 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.
520	3557	And though you asked, I never told you why, but now I think it is time you knew.
521	3560	I see your tears and I worry more about you than I do about me, because I fear the pain I know you will go through.
522	3561	There are no words to express my sorrow for this, and I am at a loss for words.
523	3562	So, 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.
524	3564	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 about us.
525	3565	And perhaps, just perhaps, we will find a way to be together again.
526	3567	Know that I love you, that I always will, and that no matter what happens, know I have led the greatest life possible.
527	3568	My life with you. And if you save this letter to read again, then believe what I am writing for you now.
528	3569	Noah, wherever you are and whenever this is, I love you.
529	3570	I love you now as I write this, and I love you now as you read this.
530	3571	And I am so sorry if I am not able to tell you.
531	3572	I love you deeply, my husband.

532	3573	You are, and always have been, my dream.
533	3580	I must pass this desk to get to Allie's room, but at this hour I am not supposed to leave my room, and Janice has never been one to bend the rules.
534	3590	"You know you're not supposed to do this."
535	3591	"I know."
536	3592	I don't move, though.
537	3593	I am determined.
538	3599	"Then you know you shouldn't be doing this."
539	3600	I don't answer directly.
540	3601	Instead I say, "I miss her."
541	3602	"I know you do, but I can't let you see her."
542	3603	"It's our anniversary," I say.
543	3618	You even beat her disease sometimes.
544	3619	Even though the doctors don't understand it, we nurses do.
545	3620	It's love, it's as simple as that.
546	3621	It's the most incredible thing I've ever seen."
547	3632	I take steps the size of Pixie straws, and even at that pace it is dangerous, for my legs have grown tired already.
548	3633	I find I must touch the wall to keep from falling down.
549	3645	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.
550	3672	And when her lips meet mine, I feel a strange tingling I have never felt before, in all our years together, but I do not pull back.
551	3673	And suddenly, a miracle, for I feel her mouth open and I discover a forgotten paradise, unchanged all this time, ageless like the stars.
552	3674	I feel the warmth of her body, and as our tongues meet, I allow myself to slip away, as I had so many years ago.
553	3678	She murmurs softly, "Oh, Noah... I've missed you."
554	3679	Another miracle--the greatest of all! --and there's no way I can stop the tears as we begin to slip toward heaven itself.

Riwayat Hidup



Pande Made Gunawati lahir di Peliatan pada tanggal 20 Mei 1998. Penulis lahir dari pasangan suami istri Bapak I Made Balik dan Ibu Ni Wayan Kerti. Penulis berkebangsaan Indonesia dan beragama Hindu. Kini penulis bertempat tinggal di Jalan Cok Gede Rai No.34 Desa Peliatan, Kecamatan Ubud, Kabupaten Gianyar, Provinsi Bali.

Penulis menyelesaikan Pendidikan dasar di SD Negeri 4 Peliatan dan lulus pada tahun 2010. Kemudian penulis melanjutkan di SMP Negeri 1 Ubud dan lulus pada tahun 2013. Pada tahun 2016, penulis lulus dari SMA Negeri 1 Ubud jurusan IPA dan melanjutkan ke Pendidikan Sarjana Jurusan Bahasa Asing di Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha. Selanjutnya, mulai tahun 2016 sampai dengan penulisan skripsi ini, penulis masih terdaftar sebagai mahasiswa program S1 Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris di Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha.

