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Nicholas Sparks



RANDOM HOUSE

NEW YORK

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Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Part I: Colby

Chapter 1.

Chapter 2.

Chapter 3.

Chapter 4.

Chapter 5.

Chapter 6.

Part II: Beverly

Chapter 7.

Chapter 8.

Chapter 9.

Chapter 10.

Chapter 11.

Chapter 12.

Chapter 13.

Chapter 14.

Part III: Colby

Chapter 15.

[Chapter 16.](#)

[Chapter 17.](#)

[Chapter 18.](#)

[Chapter 19.](#)

[Chapter 20.](#)

[Chapter 21.](#)

[Chapter 22.](#)

[Chapter 23.](#)

[Part IV: Beverly](#)

[Chapter 24.](#)

[Chapter 25.](#)

[Chapter 26.](#)

[Chapter 27.](#)

[Chapter 28.](#)

[Chapter 29.](#)

[Chapter 30.](#)

[Chapter 31.](#)

[Chapter 32.](#)

[Part V: Colby](#)

[Chapter 33.](#)

[Chapter 34.](#)

[Chapter 35.](#)

[Part VI: Beverly](#)

[Chapter 36.](#)

[Chapter 37.](#)

[Chapter 38.](#)

[Chapter 39.](#)

[Chapter 40.](#)

[Chapter 41.](#)

[Chapter 42.](#)

[Chapter 43.](#)

[Chapter 44.](#)

[Part VII: Colby](#)

[Chapter 45.](#)

[Chapter 46.](#)

[Chapter 47.](#)

[Chapter 48.](#)

[Chapter 49.](#)

[Chapter 50.](#)

[Chapter 51.](#)

[Chapter 52.](#)

[Chapter 53.](#)

[Chapter 54.](#)

[Chapter 55.](#)

[Chapter 56.](#)

[Chapter 57.](#)

[Chapter 58.](#)

[Chapter 59.](#)

[Chapter 60.](#)

[Chapter 61.](#)

[Chapter 62.](#)

[Chapter 63.](#)

[Chapter 64.](#)

[Chapter 65.](#)

[Chapter 66.](#)

[Chapter 67.](#)

[Chapter 68.](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[*Dedication*](#)

[*Acknowledgments*](#)

[*By Nicholas Sparks*](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

PART I



Colby

I.

LET ME TELL YOU WHO I am: My name is Colby Mills, I'm twenty-five years old, and I'm sitting in a strappy foldout chair on St. Pete Beach, Florida, on a beautiful Saturday in mid-May. The cooler next to me is stocked with beer and water on ice, and the temperature is almost perfect, with a steady breeze strong enough to keep the mosquitoes at bay. Behind me is the Don CeSar Hotel, a stately accommodation that reminds me of a pink version of the Taj Mahal, and I can hear live music drifting from the pool area. The guy who's performing is just okay; he strangles the chords every now and then, but I doubt that anyone really minds. I've peeked into the pool area a couple of times since I set up here and noticed that most of the guests have been working on cocktails throughout the afternoon, which means they would probably enjoy listening to just about anything.

I'm not from here, by the way. Before I arrived, I'd never even heard of this place. When people back home asked me where St. Pete Beach was located, I explained that it was a beach town across the causeway from Tampa, near St. Petersburg and Clearwater on the west coast of Florida, which didn't help much. For most of them, Florida meant amusement parks in Orlando and bikini-clad women on beaches in Miami, along with a bunch

of other places no one really cared about. To be fair, before I arrived, Florida to me was simply a weirdly shaped state hanging off the east coast of the United States.

As for St. Pete, its best feature is a gorgeous white-sand beach, the prettiest I've ever seen. The shore is fronted by a mixture of high-end hotels and low-end motels, but most of the neighborhoods seem typically middle-class, populated by retirees and blue-collar workers, along with families enjoying inexpensive vacations. There are the usual fast-food restaurants and strip malls and gyms and shops selling cheap beach items, but despite those obvious signs of modernity, there's something about the town that feels a little bit forgotten.

Still, I have to admit that I like it here. Technically I'm here to work, but really it's more vacation. I'm playing four gigs a week at Bobby T's Beach Bar for three weeks, but my sessions only last a few hours, which means I have a lot of time to go for jogs and sit in the sun and otherwise do absolutely nothing at all. A guy could get used to a life like this. The crowds at Bobby T's are friendly—and yes, boozy, just like at the Don CeSar—but there's nothing better than performing for an appreciative audience. Especially given that I'm basically a nobody from out of state who'd pretty much stopped performing two months before I graduated from high school. Over the past seven years, I've played now and then for friends or an acquaintance who's throwing a party, but that's about it. These days I consider music a hobby, albeit one that I love. There's nothing I enjoy more than spending a day playing or writing songs, even if my real life doesn't leave me much time for it.

Funny thing happened, though, in my first ten days here. The first couple of shows went as expected, with a crowd that I assumed was typical for Bobby T's. About half the seats were taken, most of the people there to enjoy the sunset, cocktails, and conversation while music played in the background. By my third show, however, every seat was filled, and I recognized faces from earlier shows. By the fourth time I stepped up, not only were all the seats filled but a handful of people were willing to stand in order to hear me play. Hardly anyone was watching the sunset at all, and I

started to receive requests for some of my original songs. Requests for beach-bar classics like “Summer of ’69,” “American Pie,” and “Brown Eyed Girl” were common, but my music? Then, last night, the crowd spilled onto the beach, additional chairs were scrounged up, and they adjusted the speakers so everyone could hear me. As I began setting up, I assumed it was simply a Friday-night crowd, but the booker, Ray, assured me that what was happening wasn’t typical. In fact, he said, it was the largest crowd he’d ever seen at Bobby T’s.

I should have felt pretty good about that, and I guess I did, at least a little bit. Still, I didn’t read too much into it. After all, performing for tipsy vacationers at a beach bar with drink specials at sunset was a far cry from selling out stadiums around the country. Years ago, I’ll admit, getting “discovered” had been a dream—I think it’s a dream for everyone who loves performing—but those dreams gradually dissolved in the light of a newfound reality. I’m not bitter about it. The logical side of me knows that what we want and what we get are usually two entirely different things. Besides, in ten days, I’m going to have to head home to the same life I was leading before I came to Florida.

Don’t get me wrong. My real life isn’t bad. Actually, I’m pretty good at what I do, even if the long hours can be isolating. I’ve never been out of the country, I’ve never ridden on an airplane, and I’m only vaguely aware of recent news, mainly because talking heads bore the hell out of me. Tell me what’s going on in our country or around the world, talk about some issue of major political importance, and I promise to be surprised. Though it will likely offend some people, I don’t even vote, and the only reason I know the governor’s last name is because I once played in a bar called Cooper’s in Carteret County, near the North Carolina coast, about an hour from my home.

About that...

I live in Washington, a small town located on the banks of the Pamlico River in eastern North Carolina, though many people refer to it as either *Little Washington* or *the Original Washington*, so as not to confuse my hometown with our nation’s capital, five hours to the north. As if anyone

could possibly confuse them. Washington and Washington, D.C., are about as different as two places can possibly be, mainly because the capital is a city surrounded by suburbs and is a central hub of power, while my town is tiny and rural, with a supermarket named Piggly Wiggly. Fewer than ten thousand people reside there, and in my teen years I often found myself wondering why anyone would want to live there at all. For much of my life, I longed to escape as quickly as I could. Now, though, I've concluded that there are worse places for a guy to call home. Washington is peaceful and its people kind, the sort who wave to drivers from their porches. There's a nice waterfront along the river with a couple of decent restaurants, and for those who like the arts, the town boasts the Turnage Theatre, where locals can watch plays performed by other locals. There are schools and a Walmart and fast-food restaurants, and weatherwise, it's ideal. It snows maybe once or twice every second or third year, and the temperature in the summer is a lot more moderate than in places like South Carolina or Georgia. Sailing on the river is a popular pastime, and it's possible for me to load the surfboard into the back of my truck on a whim and catch waves at the beach before I've even finished drinking my large to-go cup of coffee. Greenville—a smallish but actual city, with college sports teams and movie theaters and more-varied dining—is a quick jaunt up the highway, twenty-five minutes of easy driving.

In other words, I like it there. Usually, I don't even think about whether I'm missing out on something bigger or better or whatever. As a rule I take things as they come and try not to expect or regret much. It might not sound all that special, but it works for me.

I suppose it might have something to do with my upbringing. When I was little, I lived with my mom and my sister in a small house not far from the waterfront. I never knew my father. My sister, Paige, is six years older than me, and the memories I have of my mom are hazy, blurred by the passage of time. I have a vague recollection of poking at a toad jumping through the grass and another of my mom singing in the kitchen, but that's about it. She died when I was five, so my sister and I moved in with my aunt and uncle at their farm on the outskirts of town. My aunt was my

mom's much older sister, and though they'd never been all that close, she was our only living family. In their minds, they did what was necessary because it was also the right thing to do.

They're good people, my aunt and uncle, but because they never had children, I doubt they really knew what they were signing on for. Working the farm took nearly all their time, and Paige and I weren't the easiest kids, especially in the beginning. I was accident-prone—at the time, I was growing like a weed and stumbled at what seemed to be every third step I took. I also cried a lot—mostly about my mom, I guess—though I don't remember this. As for Paige, she was way ahead of the curve when it came to teenage moodiness. She could scream or sob or pitch a fit with the best of them and spend days locked in her room while she cried and refused to eat. She and my aunt were fire and ice from the very beginning, but I always felt safe with her. Even though my aunt and uncle tried their best, it had to be overwhelming, so little by little it fell to my sister to raise me. She was the one who packed my school lunches and walked me to the bus; she made me Campbell's soup or Kraft Macaroni & Cheese on the weekends and sat with me while I watched cartoons. And because we shared a room, she was the one I talked to before I fell asleep. Sometimes, but not always, she helped me with my chores in addition to doing her own; farming and chores are basically synonymous. Paige was far and away the person I trusted most in the world.

She was also talented. She loved to draw and could sketch for hours, which is why I'm not all that surprised that she eventually became an artist. These days, she makes her living working with stained glass, handcrafting replica Tiffany lamps that cost serious money and are popular with high-end interior decorators. She's built herself a pretty good online business and I'm proud of her, not only because of what she meant to me growing up but because life has seriously kicked her in the teeth in more ways than one. There've been times, I'll admit, when I wondered how she was able to keep going at all.

Don't get me wrong about my aunt and uncle. Even though Paige watched after me, they always did the important things. We had decent beds

and got new school clothes every year. There was always milk in the refrigerator and snacks in the cupboards. Neither of them was violent, they seldom raised their voices, and I think the only time I ever saw them have a glass of wine was on New Year's Eve during my teenage years. But farming is hard work; a farm, in many ways, is like a demanding, ever-needy child, and they didn't have the time or energy to go to school events or bring us to a friend's birthday party or even toss a football back and forth on the weekends. There are no weekends on a farm; Saturdays and Sundays are just like every other day of the week. About the only thing we really did as a family was have dinner every night at six, and it seems I remember all of them, mainly because every dinner was exactly the same. We'd get called to the kitchen, where we'd help bring the food to the table. Once we sat, and more from a sense of obligation than actual interest, my aunt would ask my sister and me what we'd done in school. While we answered, my uncle would butter two pieces of bread to go along with his meal, no matter what we were having, and he'd nod silently at our answers, no matter what we said. After that, our meals were marked only by the sound of utensils clicking against the plates. Sometimes, Paige and I would talk, but my aunt and uncle concentrated on finishing their meals like another chore they had to complete. Both of them were generally quiet, but my uncle took silence to a whole other level. Days would pass where I never heard him speak at all.

He did, however, play the guitar. Where he learned, I have no idea, but he was decent on the instrument and had a craggy resonant voice that drew a listener in. He favored songs by Johnny Cash or Kris Kristofferson—*country folksy*, he called it—and once or twice a week, after dinner, he'd sit on the porch and play. When I began showing an interest—I guess I was seven or eight at the time—he handed over the guitar and, with heavily calloused hands, he helped me learn the chords. I wasn't a natural by any means, but he was surprisingly patient. Even at that young age, I realized that I'd found my passion. While Paige had her art, I had music.

I began practicing on my own. I also began singing, mainly the kinds of songs my uncle sang, because they were the only ones I knew. My aunt and

uncle bought me an acoustic guitar for Christmas, then an electric guitar the following year, and I practiced on those, too. I taught myself to play songs that I heard on the radio by ear, without ever learning how to read music. By twelve, I'd reached the point where I could hear a song once and mimic it almost perfectly.

As I grew older, my chores at the farm naturally increased, which meant that I was never able to practice as much as I wanted. It wasn't enough to feed and water the chickens every morning; I had to repair irrigation pipes or spend long hours in the sun, picking worms from tobacco leaves and crushing them with my fingers, which is just as disgusting as it sounds. Well before I hit my teenage years, I'd learned to drive anything with an engine—tractors, backhoes, harvesters, seeders, you name it—and I spent entire weekends doing just that. I also learned to fix or repair anything that was broken, though I eventually began to despise all of it. With chores and music taking almost all my free time, something had to give, and my grades in middle school began dropping. I didn't care. The only class I really cared about was music, especially as my teacher happened to be an amateur songwriter. She took a special interest in me, and with her help, I wrote my first song, when I was twelve. I was hooked after that and began writing nonstop, improving little by little.

By that point, Paige was working with a local artist who specialized in stained glass. She'd worked at the shop part-time while she was in high school, but by graduation she was already crafting her own Tiffany-inspired lamps. Unlike me, Paige got pretty good grades all along, but she had no desire to go to college. Instead, she worked on building her business and eventually met a guy and fell in love. She left the farm, moved out of state, and got married. I hardly heard from her during those years after she left; even after she had a baby, I only glimpsed her on the rare FaceTime call, looking tired and holding her crying kid. For the first time in my life, it felt as though no one was really watching out for me.

Add all that up—my overworked aunt and uncle, my lack of interest in school, my sister moving away, and chores I had come to hate—and it's not surprising that I began to rebel. As soon as I started high school, I fell in

with a group of guys with the same tendencies, and we egged one another on. At first, it was little things—throwing rocks through the windows of abandoned houses, prank phone calls in the middle of the night, stealing the occasional candy bar from a convenience store—but within a few months, one of those friends stole a bottle of gin from his dad’s liquor cabinet. We met by the river and passed the bottle back and forth. I had way too much and threw up for the rest of the night, and since I’m honest, I’ll admit I didn’t learn the appropriate lesson. Instead of waving off the bottle whenever it came my way, I spent countless weekends with my brain blurry at the edges. My grades remained in the tank, and I began to skip certain chores. I’m not proud of who I was back then, but I also know it’s impossible to change the past.

Right after my sophomore year began, however, my life took another turn. I’d drifted away from my loser friends by then, and I heard through the grapevine that a local band needed a new guitarist. Why not? I figured. I was only fifteen, and when I showed up to audition, I saw the band members—all in their twenties—smothering their laughter. I ignored them, plugged in my electric guitar, and played Eddie Van Halen’s “Eruption” solo. Ask anyone in the know, and they’ll tell you it’s not easy. Long story short, I ended up playing my first gig with them the following weekend, after hearing the entire set for the first time in the single rehearsal we had beforehand. Compared to them—with their piercings and tattoos and either long or spiked bleached hair—I resembled a choirboy, so they kept me stationed in the back near the drummer, even during my solos.

If music wasn’t all-consuming before, it quickly became that way. I stopped cutting my hair, got illegal tattoos, and eventually the band let me start performing out front. At the farm, I pretty much quit doing any chores whatsoever. My aunt and uncle were at a loss, so they chose to ignore me, which kept our conflicts to a minimum. We even stopped eating together. I devoted more time to music, fantasizing about playing to massive crowds in sold-out venues.

In retrospect, I probably should have known it would never work out, since the band wasn’t all that good. All of our songs were in the screamy,

post-punk vein, and while some people enjoyed the music, I'm pretty sure most of the audiences we played to in our part of eastern North Carolina weren't dazzled. Nonetheless, we managed to find a tiny niche, and until almost the end of my senior year in high school, we played twenty or twenty-five weekends a year in dives as far away as Charlotte.

But there was friction in the band, and it grew worse over time. The lead singer insisted we play only the songs he'd written, and while it might not sound like a big deal, ego has killed more bands than just about anything. Adding insult to injury, the rest of us knew that most of his songs were mediocre. Eventually he announced that he was moving to Los Angeles to make it on his own, since none of us appreciated his genius. As soon as he stomped off, the drummer—at twenty-seven, he was the oldest among us—announced that he was quitting, as well, which wasn't a surprise, either, since his girlfriend had been pushing him to settle down for a while. As he put away his kit and loaded it in the car, the other three of us nodded at one another, knowing it was over, and packed up. After that night, I never spoke to any of them again.

Strangely, I was less depressed than simply lost. As much as I'd enjoyed performing, there was too much drama and too little momentum that might lead the band anywhere. At the same time, I had no idea what to do with my life, so I just went through the motions. I graduated high school—probably because the teachers didn't want to have to deal with me for another year—and spent a lot of time in my room, writing music and recording songs I posted to Spotify and Instagram and YouTube. No one seemed to care. Little by little, I began pitching in at the farm again, though it was apparent that my aunt and uncle had long since given up on me. More important, I started to take stock of my life, especially as I spent more time on the property. As self-absorbed as I'd been, even I could see that my aunt and uncle were getting older and that the farm was struggling. When I'd first arrived as a child, the farm grew corn, cotton, blueberries, tobacco, and we raised thousands of chickens for processing. All that had changed in the past few years. Bad crops and bad business decisions and bad prices and bad loans meant that a good portion of the original land had been either sold

or leased to our neighbors. I wondered how I could have missed the changes as they'd been happening, even though I knew the answer.

Then, on a warm August morning, my uncle had a massive heart attack while walking toward the tractor. His left anterior descending artery was blocked at the origin; as the folks at the hospital explained, this kind of heart attack is often referred to as a widow-maker, because the odds of survival are incredibly slim. Maybe it was all the buttered bread he ate at dinners, but he died even before the ambulance arrived. My aunt was the one who found him, and I've never heard anyone scream and wail the way she did that morning.

Paige came home for the service and stayed for a little while, having left her child with her husband and mother-in-law. I worried that her return would create more strife, but my sister seemed to recognize that something had broken inside my aunt in the same way my sister sometimes felt broken. It's impossible to know what goes on in people's private lives, but because I'd never seen my aunt or uncle act all that romantic toward each other, I guess I'd grown up thinking that they were more like business partners than deeply in love. Obviously, I was wrong about that. To my eyes, my aunt seemed almost shrunken in the aftermath. She barely ate and carried a handkerchief to soak up her constant stream of tears. Paige listened to familiar stories for hours, kept up the house, and made sure the employees at the farm adhered to a schedule. But she couldn't stay forever, and after she left, I suddenly found myself trying to take care of things in the same way my sister had been doing.

In addition to managing the farm and making sure my aunt was eating enough, I began leafing through the pile of invoices and records on my uncle's desk. Even my rudimentary math skills let me know the whole operation was a mess. Though the tobacco crop still made money, the chickens, corn, and cotton had become steadily losing propositions. To stave off a looming bankruptcy, my uncle had already arranged to lease more land to the neighbors. While that would solve the immediate problem, I knew it would leave the farm with a bigger long-term issue. My initial reaction was to urge my aunt to sell the rest of the farm outright so she

could buy a small house and retire, but she nixed that idea immediately. Around that same time, I also found clippings from various magazines and newsletters that my uncle had collected, which discussed the market for healthier and more-exotic food options, along with notes and revenue projections he'd already completed. My uncle may have been quiet and not much of a businessman overall, but he'd clearly been considering changes. I discussed those with my aunt, and she eventually agreed that the only option was to put my uncle's plans in motion.

We didn't have the money to do much right off the bat, but over the last seven years, with tremendous effort, risks, challenges, financial help from Paige, occasional lucky breaks, and way too many sleepless nights, we slowly transitioned from raising chickens for processing to specializing in organic cage-free eggs, which have a much higher profit margin; we offer them to grocery stores throughout North and South Carolina. While we still grow tobacco, we used the remaining land to concentrate on heirloom tomatoes, the kind that are popular in upscale restaurants and pricey grocery stores, and the margin on those has proved to be substantial, as well. Four years ago, the farm turned a profit for the first time in ages, and we began to lower our debt to reasonable levels. We even took back some of the leases from our neighbors, so the farm is actually growing again, and last year the farm earned more than ever.

Like I said, I'm pretty good at what I do.

What I am is a farmer.