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The Lucky One

Written by Nicholas Sparks

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The Lucky One

Nicholas Sparks

sphere

SPHERE

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For Jamie Raab and Dennis Dalrymple

A year to remember . . .
and a year to forget.
I'm with you in spirit.

Acknowledgments

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At the top of the list, of course, is my wife, Cathy. More than anything, she keeps me centered and focused on all the things in life that are really important. I tell my sons they would do well to marry a woman much like her one day. *Thank you!*

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P.S. The languages are: English, Spanish, German, French, Japanese, Italian, Scottish Gaelic, Hebrew, Farsi (Persian), Russian, Latvian, Greek, Chinese, Arabic, Portuguese, and Hawaiian. At least according to the site I found on the Internet. But who can believe everything there?

1

Clayton and Thibault

Deputy Keith Clayton hadn't heard them approach, and up close, he didn't like the looks of them any more than he had the first time he'd seen them. The dog was part of it. He wasn't fond of German shepherds, and this one, though he was standing quietly, reminded him of Panther, the police dog that rode with Deputy Kenny Moore and was quick to bite suspects in the crotch at the slightest command. Most of the time he regarded Moore as an idiot, but he was still just about the closest thing to a friend that Clayton had in the department, and he had to admit that Moore had a way of telling those crotch-biting stories that made Clayton double over in laughter. And Moore would definitely have appreciated the little skinny-dipping party Clayton had just broken up, when he'd spied a couple of coeds sunning down by the creek in all their morning glory. He hadn't been there for more than a few minutes and had snapped only a couple of pictures on the digital camera when he saw a third girl pop up from behind a hydrangea bush. After quickly ditching the camera in the bushes behind him, he'd stepped out from behind the tree, and a moment later, he and the coed were face-to-face.

"Well, what have we got here?" he drawled, trying to put her on the defensive.

He hadn't liked the fact that he'd been caught, nor was he pleased with his insipid opening line. Usually he was smoother than that. A lot smoother. Thankfully, the girl was too embarrassed to notice much of anything, and she almost tripped while trying to back up. She stammered something like an answer as she tried to cover herself with her hands. It was like watching someone play a game of Twister by herself.

He made no effort to avert his gaze. Instead he smiled, pretending not to notice her body, as if he bumped into naked women in the woods all the time. He could already tell she knew nothing about the camera.

"Now calm down. What's going on?" he asked.

He knew full well what was going on. It happened a few times every summer, but especially in August: Coeds from Chapel Hill or NC State, heading to the beach for a long, last-chance weekend at Emerald Isle before the fall term began, often made a detour onto an old logging road that twisted and bumped for a mile or so into the national forest before reaching the point where Swan Creek made a sharp turn toward the South River. There was a rock-pebble beach there that had come to be known for nude sunbathing—how that happened, he had no idea—and Clayton often made it a point to swing by on the off chance he might get lucky. Two weeks ago, he'd seen six lovelies; today, however, there were three, and the two who'd been lying on their towels were already reaching for their shirts. Though one of them was a bit heavy, the other two—including the brunette standing in front of him—had the kind of figures that made frat boys go crazy. Deputies, too.

"We didn't know anyone was out here! We thought it would be okay!"

Her face held just enough innocence to make him think, *Wouldn't Daddy be proud if he knew what his little girl was up to?* It

amused him to imagine what she might say to that, but since he was in uniform, he knew he had to say something official. Besides, he knew he was pressing his luck; if word got out that the sheriff's office was actually patrolling the area, there'd be no more coeds in the future, and that was something he didn't want to contemplate.

"Let's go talk to your friends."

He followed her back toward the beach, watching as she tried unsuccessfully to cover her backside, enjoying the little show. By the time they stepped from the trees into the clearing by the river, her friends had pulled on their shirts. The brunette jogged and jiggled toward the others and quickly reached for a towel, knocking over a couple of cans of beer in the process. Clayton motioned to a nearby tree.

"Didn't y'all see the sign?"

On cue, their eyes swung that way. People were sheep, waiting for the next order, he thought. The sign, small and partially hidden by the low-slung branches of an ancient live oak, had been posted by order of Judge Kendrick Clayton, who also happened to be his uncle. The idea for the signs had been Keith's; he knew that the public prohibition would only enhance the attraction of the place.

"We didn't see it!" the brunette cried, swiveling back to him. "We didn't know! We just heard about this place a couple of days ago!" She continued to protest while struggling with the towel; the others were too terrified to do much of anything except try to wiggle back into their bikini bottoms. "It's the first time we've ever been here!"

It came out like a whine, making her sound like a spoiled sorority sister. Which all of them probably were. They had that *look*.

"Did you know that public nudity is a misdemeanor in this county?"

He saw their young faces grow even more pale, knowing they

were imagining this little transgression on their record. Fun to watch, but he reminded himself not to let it go too far.

"What's your name?"

"Amy." The brunette swallowed. "Amy White."

"Where are you from?"

"Chapel Hill. But I'm from Charlotte originally."

"I see some alcohol there. Are y'all twenty-one?"

For the first time, the others answered as well. "Yes, sir."

"Okay, Amy. I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to take you at your word that you didn't see the sign and that you're of legal age to drink, so I'm not going to make a big deal out of this. I'll pretend I wasn't even here. As long as you promise not to tell my boss that I let you three off the hook."

They weren't sure whether to believe him.

"Really?"

"Really," he said. "I was in college once, too." He hadn't been, but he knew it sounded good. "And you might want to put your clothes on. You never know—there might be people lurking around." He flashed a smile. "Make sure you clean up all the cans, okay?"

"Yes, sir."

"I appreciate it." He turned to leave.

"That's it?"

Turning around, he flashed his smile again. "That's it. Y'all take care now."

Clayton pushed through the underbrush, ducking beneath the occasional branch on the way back to his cruiser, thinking he'd handled that well. Very well indeed. Amy had actually smiled at him, and as he'd turned away, he'd toyed with the idea of doubling back and asking her for her phone number. No, he decided, it was probably better to simply leave good enough alone. More than likely they'd go back and tell their friends that even though they'd been caught by the sheriff, nothing had happened to them. Word would get around that the

deputies around here were *cool*. Still, as he wove through the woods, he hoped the pictures came out. They would make a nice addition to his little collection.

All in all, it had been an excellent day. He was about to go back for the camera when he heard whistling. He followed the sound toward the logging road and saw the stranger with a dog, walking slowly up the road, looking like some kind of hippie from the sixties.

The stranger wasn't with the girls. Clayton was sure of it. The guy was too old to be a college student, for one thing; he had to be late twenties, at least. His long hair reminded Clayton of a rat's nest, and on the stranger's back, Clayton could see the outlines of a sleeping bag poking out from beneath a backpack. This was no day-tripper on the way to the beach; this guy had the appearance of someone who'd been hiking, maybe even camping out. No telling how long he'd been here or what he'd seen.

Like Clayton taking pictures?

No way. It wasn't possible. He'd been hidden from the main road, the underbrush was thick, and he would have heard someone tramping through the woods. Right? Still, it was an odd place to be hiking. They were in the middle of nowhere out here, and the last thing he wanted was a bunch of hippie losers ruining this spot for the coeds.

By then, the stranger had passed him. He was nearly to the cruiser and heading toward the Jeep that the girls had driven. Clayton stepped onto the road and cleared his throat. The stranger and the dog turned at the sound.

From a distance, Clayton continued to evaluate them. The stranger seemed unfazed by Clayton's sudden appearance, as did the dog, and there was something in the stranger's gaze that unsettled him. Like he'd almost expected Clayton to show up. Same thing with the German shepherd. The dog's expression was aloof and wary at the same time—*intelligent*, almost—which

was the same way Panther often appeared before Moore set him loose. His stomach did a quick flip-flop. He had to force himself not to cover his privates.

For a long minute, they continued to stare at each other. Clayton had learned a long time ago that his uniform intimidated most people. Everyone, even innocent people, got nervous around the law, and he figured this guy was no exception. It was one of the reasons he loved being a deputy.

"You got a leash for your dog?" he said, making it sound more like a command than a question.

"In my backpack."

Clayton could hear no accent at all. "Johnny Carson English," as his mother used to describe it. "Put it on."

"Don't worry. He won't move unless I tell him to."

"Put it on anyway."

The stranger lowered his backpack and fished around; Clayton craned his neck, hoping for a glimpse of anything that could be construed as drugs or weapons. A moment later, the leash was attached to the dog's collar and the stranger faced him with an expression that seemed to say, *Now what?*

"What are you doing out here?" Clayton asked.

"Hiking."

"That's quite a pack you've got for a hike."

The stranger said nothing.

"Or maybe you were sneaking around, trying to see the sights?"

"Is that what people do when they're here?"

Clayton didn't like his tone, or the implication. "I'd like to see some identification."

The stranger bent over his backpack again and fished out his passport. He held an open palm to the dog, making the dog stay, then took a step toward Clayton and handed it over.

"No driver's license?"

"I don't have one."

Clayton studied the name, his lips moving slightly. "Logan Thibault?"

The stranger nodded.

"Where you from?"

"Colorado."

"Long trip."

The stranger said nothing.

"You going anywhere in particular?"

"I'm on my way to Arden."

"What's in Arden?"

"I couldn't say. I haven't been there yet."

Clayton frowned at the answer. Too slick. Too . . . challenging? Too something. Whatever. All at once, he knew he didn't like this guy. "Wait here," he said. "You don't mind if I check this out, do you?"

"Help yourself."

As Clayton headed back to the car, he glanced over his shoulder and saw Thibault reach into his backpack and pull out a small bowl before proceeding to empty a bottle of water into it. Like he didn't have a care in the world.

We'll find out, won't we? In the cruiser, Clayton radioed in the name and spelling before being interrupted by the dispatcher.

"It's Thibault, like T-bow, not Thigh-bolt. It's French."

"Why should I care how it's pronounced?"

"I was just saying—"

"Whatever, Marge. Just check it out, will you?"

"Does he look French?"

"How the hell would I know what a Frenchman looks like?"

"I'm just curious. Don't get so huffy about it. I'm a little busy here."

Yeah, real busy, Clayton thought. Eating doughnuts, most likely. Marge scarfed down at least a dozen Krispy Kremes a day. She must have weighed at least three hundred pounds.

Through the window, he could see the stranger squatting

beside the dog and whispering to it as it lapped up the water. He shook his head. Talking to animals. Freak. Like the dog could understand anything other than the most basic of commands. His ex-wife used to do that, too. That woman treated dogs like people, which should have warned him to stay away from her in the first place.

"I can't find anything," he heard Marge say. She sounded like she was chewing something. "No outstanding warrants that I can see."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. I do know how to do my job."

As though he'd been listening in on the conversation, the stranger retrieved the bowl and slipped it back into his backpack, then slung his backpack over his shoulder.

"Have there been any other unusual calls? People loitering around, things like that?"

"No. It's been quiet this morning. And where are you, by the way? Your dad's been trying to find you."

Clayton's dad was the county sheriff.

"Tell him I'll be back in a little while."

"He seems mad."

"Just tell him I've been on patrol, okay?"

So he'll know I've been working, he didn't bother to add.

"Will do."

That's better.

"I gotta go."

He put the radio handset back in place and sat without moving, feeling the slightest trace of disappointment. It would have been fun to see how the guy handled lockup, what with that girly hair and all. The Landry brothers would have had a field day with him. They were regulars in lockup on Saturday nights: drunk and disorderly, disturbing the peace, fighting, almost always with each other. Except when they were in lockup. Then they'd pick on someone else.

He fiddled with the handle of his car door. And what was his dad mad about this time? Dude got on his nerves. Do this. Do that. You served those papers yet? Why are you late? Where've you been? Half the time he wanted to tell the old guy to mind his own damn business. Old guy still thought he ran things around here.

No matter. He supposed he'd find out sooner or later. Now it was time to get the hippie loser out of here, before the girls came out. Place was supposed to be private, right? Hippie freaks could ruin the place.

Clayton got out of the car, closing the door behind him. The dog cocked its head to the side as Clayton approached. He handed the passport back. "Sorry for the inconvenience, Mr. Thibault." This time, he mangled the pronunciation on purpose. "Just doing my job. Unless, of course, you've got some drugs or guns in your pack."

"I don't."

"You care to let me see for myself?"

"Not really. Fourth Amendment and all."

"I see your sleeping bag there. You been camping?"

"I was in Burke County last night."

Clayton studied the guy, thinking about the answer.

"There aren't any campgrounds around here."

The guy said nothing.

It was Clayton who looked away. "You might want to keep that dog on the leash."

"I didn't think there was a leash law in this county."

"There isn't. It's for your dog's safety. Lot of cars out by the main road."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Okay, then." Clayton turned away before pausing once more. "If you don't mind my asking, how long have you been out here?"

"I just walked up. Why?"

Something in the way he answered made Clayton wonder, and he hesitated before reminding himself again that there was no way the guy could know what he'd been up to. "No reason."

"Can I go?"

"Yeah. Okay."

Clayton watched the stranger and his dog start up the logging road before veering onto a small trail that led into the woods. Once he vanished, Clayton went back to his original vantage point to search for the camera. He poked his arm into the bushes, kicked at the pine straw, and retraced his steps a couple of times to make sure he was in the right place. Eventually, he dropped to his knees, panic beginning to settle in. The camera belonged to the sheriff's department. He'd only *borrowed* it for these special outings, and there'd be a lot of questions from his dad if it turned out to be lost. Worse, discovered with a card full of nudie pictures. His dad was a stickler for protocol and responsibility.

By then, a few minutes had passed. In the distance, he heard the throaty roar of an engine fire up. He assumed the coeds were leaving; only briefly did he consider what they might be thinking when they noticed his cruiser was still there. He had other issues on his mind.

The camera was gone.

Not lost. *Gone*. And the damn thing sure as hell didn't walk off on its own. No way the girls had found it, either. Which meant Thigh-bolt had been playing him all along. *Thigh-bolt. Playing. Him.* Unbelievable. He knew the guy had been acting too slick, too *I Know What You Did Last Summer.*

No way was he getting away with that. No grimy, hippie, dog-talking freak was ever going to show up Keith Clayton. Not in this life, anyway.

He pushed through branches heading back to the road, figuring he'd catch up to Logan *Thigh-bolt* and have a little look-see. And that was just for starters. More than that would follow;

that much was certain. Guy plays him? That just wasn't done. Not in this town, anyway. He didn't give a damn about the dog, either. Dog gets upset? Bye, bye, doggie. Simple as that. German shepherds were weapons—there wasn't a court in the land where that wouldn't stand up.

First things first, though. Find Thibault. Get the camera. Then figure out the next step.

It was only then, while approaching his cruiser, that he realized both his rear tires were flat.

"What did you say your name was?"

Thibault leaned across the front seat of the Jeep a few minutes later, talking over the roar of the wind. "Logan Thibault." He thumbed over his shoulder. "And this is Zeus."

Zeus was in the back of the Jeep, tongue out, nose lifted to the wind as the Jeep sped toward the highway.

"Beautiful dog. I'm Amy. And this is Jennifer and Lori."

Thibault glanced over his shoulder. "Hi."

"Hey."

They seemed distracted. Not surprising, Thibault thought, considering what they'd been through. "I appreciate the ride."

"No big deal. And you said you're going to Hampton?"

"If it's not too far."

"It's right on the way."

After leaving the logging road and taking care of a couple of things, Thibault had edged back to the road just as the girls were pulling out. He'd held out his thumb, thankful that Zeus was with him, and they'd pulled over almost immediately.

Sometimes things work out just like they're supposed to.

Though he pretended otherwise, he'd actually seen the three of them earlier that morning as they'd come in—he'd camped just over the ridge from the beach—but had given them the privacy they deserved as soon as they'd started to disrobe. To his mind, what they were doing fell into the "no harm, no foul"

category; aside from him, they were completely alone out here, and he had no intention of hanging around to stare. Who cared if they took their clothes off or, for that matter, dressed up in chicken costumes? It wasn't any of his business, and he'd intended to keep it that way—until he saw the deputy driving up the road in a Hampton County Sheriff's Department car.

He got a good look at the deputy through the windshield, and there was something *wrong* about the guy's expression. Hard to say what it was, exactly, and he didn't pause to analyze it. He turned around, cutting through the forest, and arrived in time to see the deputy checking the disk in his camera before quietly shutting the door of his cruiser. He watched him slink off toward the ridge. Thibault knew full well that the deputy could have been working officially, but he looked the way Zeus did when he was waiting for a piece of beef jerky. A little too excited about the whole thing.

Thibault had Zeus stay where he was, kept enough distance so the deputy wouldn't hear him, and the rest of the plan had come together spontaneously after that. He knew that direct confrontation was out—the deputy would have claimed he was collecting evidence, and the strength of his word against a stranger's would have been unassailable. Anything physical was out of the question, mostly because it would have caused more problems than it was worth, though he would have loved to go toe-to-toe with the guy. Luckily—or unluckily, he supposed, depending on the perspective—the girl had appeared, the deputy had panicked, and Thibault had seen where the camera had landed. Once the deputy and the girl headed back toward her friends, Thibault retrieved the camera. He could have simply left at that point, but the guy needed to be taught a lesson. Not a big lesson, just a lesson that would keep the girls' honor intact, allow Thibault to be on his way, and ruin the deputy's day. Which was why he'd doubled back to flatten the deputy's tires.

"Oh, that reminds me," Thibault volunteered. "I found your camera in the woods."

"It's not mine. Lori or Jen—did either of you lose a camera?"

Both of them shook their heads.

"Keep it anyway," Thibault said, putting it on the seat, "and thanks for the ride. I've already got one."

"You sure? It's probably expensive."

"Positive."

"Thanks."

Thibault noted the shadows playing on her features, thinking she was attractive in a big-city kind of way, with sharp features, olive skin, and brown eyes flecked with hazel. He could imagine staring at her for hours.

"Hey . . . you doing anything this weekend?" Amy asked. "We're all going out to the beach."

"I appreciate the offer, but I can't."

"I'll bet you're going to see your girlfriend, aren't you."

"What makes you say that?"

"You have that way about you."

He forced himself to turn away. "Something like that."