

A VOW TO CHERISH

by
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SYNOPSIS:

After spending almost two decades raising a successful family, Jake and Ellen Brighton anticipate spending their next years together pursuing opportunities and activities they've dreamed about for years. But their bright anticipation of that future together is cut short when Ellen begins to exhibit the early, frightening symptoms of dementia. The couple is devastated when a battery of tests determines that Ellen is a victim of early-onset Alzheimer's disease, a terminal, degenerative disease of the central nervous system.

Now, instead of looking forward to their golden years together, they are faced with the terrifying prospect of watching Ellen fade away little by little. The effects of the disease touch not only the Brighton family, but the entire community, as old friends and extended family struggle to understand the cruel ravages of Alzheimer's on this woman they love.

Finally, as Ellen grows progressively worse and begins to put herself in danger, Jake makes the agonizing decision to put her in a nursing home. Though he feels relief at having her in a place of safety, he also deals with his children's anguish, his own feelings of guilt, and with the utter loneliness of living without Ellen for the first time in years.

Ellen's health continues to deteriorate until eventually she fails even to recognize her husband. In the midst of the overwhelming changes and adjustments he must endure, Jake quite innocently meets Julia Sinclair, a young widow who seems to understand his struggle as no one else can. As their friendship grows, Jake finds himself faced with the most difficult decision he will ever make regarding his love for Ellen and his commitment to his marriage vows.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Had Jake and Ellen's relationship and the dynamics of their marriage prepared them for the devastating blow of discovering that she had Alzheimer's? In what ways could they, or any couple, become better prepared for such a possibility?
2. When Jake and Ellen first discovered that Ellen had Alzheimer's they were reluctant to share the news with their grown children. How fully should grown or older children be included in decision-making under such circumstances?

3. Was Jake justified in beginning a friendship with Julia Sinclair, a young widow? At what point, if any, do you feel that he overstepped the bounds of propriety?
4. Is it possible for a man and a woman to share a close, but pure friendship when one (or both) of them is married? How and why might men and women answer this question differently?
5. What was Julia's responsibility in placing limits on her friendship with Jake? How did she succeed or fail?
6. It seems wholly unfair that Jake--still a relatively young and virile man--should have to forfeit his happiness and his future because of Ellen's affliction. Are there other possible solutions which would allow Jake to honor the essence of his commitment to Ellen without making such life-changing sacrifices?
7. How do you feel about Jake's decision to institutionalize Ellen? Discuss other possible options for someone faced with the same dilemma. What are the moral and spiritual aspects of each.
8. The main theme of this book is the value of commitment in marriage. In what ways do the marriage vows continue to have meaning and validity when one member of the partnership is unable to fulfill their end of the agreement as Ellen was?
9. Are the vows taken at the wedding ceremony only between the man and woman who speak them, or do they perhaps extend beyond that? What might be the far-reaching effects of Jake honoring his vows? What could be the far-reaching consequences of him choosing not to honor his vows to Ellen?
10. Discuss the Epilogue of the book. Did Jake's ultimate decision dishonor Ellen or her memory? How might his decision affect his grown children? How might it affect other family and friends who were close to Ellen? What challenges and emotions might he face as a result of his actions?

NOTE: If you purchased the new movie tie-in edition of the novel (blue cover), you will notice that the main character's name has been changed to 'John Brighton' as it was in the movie. In the original version of the book (yellow cover) the character's name is Jake Brighton. Otherwise, both versions of the book are virtually identical.