

Message in a bottle

[Life](#), [Love](#)



Message In A Bottle Nicholas Sparks PROLOGUE The bottle was dropped overboard on a warm summer evening, a few hours before the rain began to fall. Like all bottles, it was fragile and would break if dropped a few feet from the ground. But when sealed properly and sent to sea, as this one was, it became one of the most seaworthy objects known to man. It could float safely through hurricanes or tropical storms, it could bob atop the most dangerous of riptides. It was, in a way, the ideal home for the message it carried inside, a message that had been sent to fulfill a promise. Like that of all bottles left to the whim of the oceans, its course was unpredictable. Winds and currents play large roles in any bottle's direction; storms and debris may shift its course as well. Occasionally a fishing net will snag a bottle and carry it a dozen miles in the opposite direction in which it was headed. The result is that two bottles dropped simultaneously into the ocean might end up a continent apart, or even on opposite sides of the globe. There is no way to predict where a bottle might travel, and that is part of its mystery. This mystery has intrigued people for as long as there have been bottles, and a few people have tried to learn more about it. In 1929 a crew of German scientists set out to track the journey of one particular bottle. It was set to sea in the South Indian Ocean with a note inside asking the finder to record the location where it washed up and to throw it back into the sea. By 1935 it had rounded the world and traveled approximately sixteen thousand miles, the longest distance officially recorded. Messages in bottles have been chronicled for centuries and include some of the most famous names in history. Ben Franklin, for instance, used message-carrying bottles to compile a basic knowledge of East Coast currents in the mid-1700s—information that

is still in use to this day. Even now the U. S. Navy uses bottles to compile information on tides and currents, and they are frequently used to track the direction of oil spills. The most celebrated message ever sent concerned a young sailor in 1784, Chunosuke Matsuyama, who was stranded on a coral reef, devoid of food and water after his boat was shipwrecked. Before his death, he carved the account of what had happened on a piece of wood, then sealed the message in a bottle. In 1935, 150 years after it had been set afloat, it washed up in the small seaside village in Japan where Matsuyama had been born. The bottle that had been dropped on a warm summer evening, however, did not contain a message about a shipwreck, nor was it being used to chart the seas. But it did contain a message that would change two people forever, two people who would otherwise never have met, and for this reason it could be called a fated message. For six days it slowly floated in a northeasterly direction, driven by winds from a high-pressure system hovering above the Gulf of Mexico. On the seventh day the winds died, and the bottle steered itself directly eastward, eventually finding its way to the Gulf Stream, where it then picked up speed, traveling north at almost seventy miles per day. Two and a half weeks after its launch, the bottle still followed the Gulf Stream. On the seventeenth day, however, another storm—this time over the mid-Atlantic—brought easterly winds strong enough to drive the bottle from the current, and the bottle began to drift toward New England. Without the Gulf Stream forcing it along, the bottle slowed again and it zigzagged in various directions near the Massachusetts shore for five days until it was snagged in a fishing net by John Hanes. Hanes found the bottle surrounded by a thousand flopping perch and tossed it aside

while he examined his catch. As luck would have it, the bottle didn't break, but it was promptly forgotten and remained near the bow of the boat for the rest of the afternoon and early evening as the boat made its journey back to Cape Cod Bay. At eight-thirty that night—and once the boat was safely inside the confines of the bay—Hanes stumbled across the bottle again while smoking a cigarette. Because the sun was dropping lower in the sky, he picked it up but saw nothing unusual inside, and he tossed it overboard without a second glance, thereby insuring that the bottle would wash up along one of the many small communities that lined the bay. It didn't happen right away, however. The bottle drifted back and forth for a few days—as if deciding where to go before choosing its course—and it finally washed up along the shore on a beach near Chatham. And it was there, after 26 days and 738 miles, that it ended its journey.

CHAPTER 1 A cold December wind was blowing, and Theresa Osborne crossed her arms as she stared out over the water. Earlier, when she'd arrived, there had been a few people walking along the shore, but they'd taken note of the clouds and were long since gone. Now she found herself alone on the beach, and she took in her surroundings. The ocean, reflecting the color of the sky, looked like liquid iron, and waves rolled up steadily on the shore. Heavy clouds were descending slowly, and the fog was beginning to thicken, making the horizon invisible. In another place, in another time, she would have felt the majesty of the beauty around her, but as she stood on the beach, she realized that she didn't feel anything at all. In a way, she felt as if she weren't really here, as if the whole thing was nothing but a dream. She'd driven here this morning, though she scarcely remembered the trip at all. When she'd made

the decision to come, she'd planned to stay overnight. She'd made the arrangements and had even looked forward to a quiet night away from Boston, but watching the ocean swirl and churn made her realize that she didn't want to stay. She would drive home as soon as she was finished, no matter how late it was. When she was finally ready, Theresa slowly started to walk toward the water. Beneath her arm she carried a bag that she had carefully packed that morning, making sure that she hadn't forgotten anything. She hadn't told anyone what she carried with her, nor had she told them what she'd intended to do today. Instead she'd said that she was going Christmas shopping. It was the perfect excuse, and though she was sure that they would have understood had she told them the truth, this trip was something she didn't want to share with anyone. It had started with her alone, and that was the same way she wanted it to end. Theresa sighed and checked her watch. Soon it would be high tide, and it was then that she would finally be ready. After finding a spot on a small dune that looked comfortable, she sat in the sand and opened her bag. Searching through it, she found the envelope she wanted. Taking a deep breath, she slowly lifted the seal. In it were three letters, carefully folded, letters that she'd read more times than she could count. Holding them in front of her, she sat on the sand and stared at them. In the bag were other items as well, though she wasn't ready to look at those yet. Instead she continued to focus on the letters. He'd used a fountain pen when he'd written them, and there were smudges in various places where the pen had leaked. The stationery, with its picture of a sailing ship in the upper right hand corner, was beginning to discolor in places, fading slowly with the passage of time. She knew there

would come a day when the words would be impossible to read, but hopefully, after today, she wouldn't feel the need to look at them so often. When she finished, she slipped them back into the envelope as carefully as she'd removed them. Then, after putting the envelope back into the bag, she looked at the beach again. From where she was sitting, she could see the place where it had all started. *** She'd been jogging at daybreak, she remembered, and she could picture that summer morning clearly. It was the beginning of a beautiful day. As she took in the world around her, she listened to the high-pitched squawking of terns and the gentle lapping of the waves as they rolled up on the sand. Even though she was on vacation, she had risen early enough to run so that she didn't have to watch where she was going. In a few hours the beach would be packed with tourists lying on their towels in the hot New England sun, soaking up the rays. Cape Cod was always crowded at that time of year, but most vacationers tended to sleep a little later, and she enjoyed the sensation of jogging on the hard, smooth sand left from the outgoing tide. Unlike the sidewalks back home, the sand seemed to give just enough, and she knew her knees wouldn't ache as they sometimes did after running on cemented pathways. She had always liked to jog, a habit she had picked up from running cross-country and track in high school. Though she wasn't competitive anymore and seldom timed her runs, running was now one of the few times she could be alone with her thoughts. She considered it to be a kind of meditation, which was why she liked to do it alone. She never could understand why people liked to run in groups. As much as she loved her son, she was glad Kevin wasn't with her. Every mother needs a break sometimes, and she was looking forward to taking it

easy while she was here. No evening soccer games or swim meets, no MTV blaring in the background, no homework to help with, no waking up in the middle of the night to comfort him when he got leg cramps. She had taken him to the airport three days ago to catch a plane to visit his father—her ex—in California, and it was only after reminding him that Kevin realized he hadn't hugged or kissed her good-bye yet. " Sorry, Mom, " he said as he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her. " Love you. Don't miss me too much, okay? " Then, turning around, he handed the ticket to the flight attendant and almost skipped onto the plane without looking back. She didn't blame him for almost forgetting. At twelve he was in that awkward phase when he thought that hugging and kissing his mom in public wasn't cool. Besides, his mind was on other things. He had been looking forward to this trip since last Christmas. He and his father were going to the Grand Canyon, then would spend a week rafting down the Colorado River, and finally go on to Disneyland. It was every kid's fantasy trip, and she was happy for him. Although he would be gone for six weeks, she knew it was good for Kevin to spend time with his father. She and David had been on relatively good terms since they'd divorced three years ago. Although he wasn't the greatest husband, he was a good father to Kevin. He never missed sending a birthday or Christmas gift, called weekly, and traveled across the country a few times a year just to spend weekends with his son. Then, of course, there were the court-mandated visits as well— six weeks in the summer, every other Christmas, and Easter break when school let out for a week. Annette, David's new wife, had her hands full with the baby, but Kevin liked her a lot, and he had never returned home feeling angry or neglected. In fact, he usually

raved about his visits and how much fun he had. There were times when she felt a twinge of jealousy at that, but she did her best to hide it from Kevin. Now, on the beach, she ran at a moderate clip. Deanna would be waiting for her to finish her run before she started breakfast—Brian would already be gone, she knew—and Theresa looked forward to visiting with her. They were an older couple—both of them were nearing sixty now— but Deanna was the best friend she had. The managing editor at the newspaper where Theresa worked, Deanna had been coming to the Cape with her husband, Brian, for years. They always stayed in the same place, the Fisher House, and when she found out that Kevin was leaving to visit his father in California for a good portion of the summer, she insisted that Theresa come along. “ Brian golfs every day he’s here, and I’d like the company, ” she’d said, “ and besides, what else are you going to do? You’ve got to get out of that apartment sometime. ” Theresa knew she was right, and after a few days of thinking it over, she finally agreed. “ I’m so glad, ” Deanna had said with a victorious look on her face. “ You’re going to love it there. ” Theresa had to admit it was a nice place to stay. The Fisher House was a beautifully restored captain’s house that sat on the edge of a rocky cliff overlooking Cape Cod Bay, and when she saw it in the distance, she slowed to a jog. Unlike the younger runners who sped up toward the end of their runs, she preferred to slow down and take it easy. At thirty-six, she didn’t recover as fast as she once had. As her breathing eased, she thought about how she would spend the rest of her day. She had brought five books with her for the vacation, books she had been wanting to read for the last year but had never gotten around to. There just didn’t seem to be enough time anymore—not with Kevin

and his never-ending energy, keeping up with the housework, and definitely not with all the work constantly piled on her desk. As a syndicated columnist for the Boston Times, she was under constant deadline pressure to put out three columns a week. Most of her co-workers thought she had it made—just type up three hundred words and be done for the day—but it wasn't like that at all. To constantly come up with something original regarding parenting wasn't easy anymore—especially if she wanted to syndicate further. Already her column, " Modern Parenting, " went out in sixty newspapers across the country, though most ran only one or two of her columns in a given week. And because the syndication offers had started only eighteen months ago and she was a newcomer to most papers, she couldn't afford even a few " off" days. Column space in most newspapers was extremely limited, and hundreds of columnists were vying for those few spots. Theresa slowed to a walk and finally stopped as a Caspian tern circled overhead. The humidity was up and she used her forearm to wipe the perspiration from her face. She took a deep breath, held it for a moment, then exhaled before looking out over the water. Because it was early, the ocean was still murky gray, but that would change once the sun rose a little higher. It looked enticing. After a moment she took off her shoes and socks, then walked to the water's edge to let the tiny waves lap over her feet. The water was refreshing, and she spent a few minutes wading back and forth. She was suddenly glad she had taken the time to write extra columns over the last few months so that she would be able to forget work this week. She couldn't remember the last time she didn't have a computer nearby, or a meeting to attend, or a deadline to meet, and it felt liberating to be away from her desk for a while. It almost felt

as if she were in control of her own destiny again, as if she were just starting out in the world. True, there were dozens of things she knew she should be doing at home. The bathroom should have been wallpapered and updated by now, the nail holes in her walls needed to be spackled, and the rest of the apartment could use some touch-up painting as well. A couple of months ago she had bought the wallpaper and some paint, towel rods and door handles, and a new vanity mirror, as well as all the tools she needed to take care of it, but she hadn't even opened the boxes yet. It was always something to do next weekend, though the weekends were often just as busy as her workdays. The items she bought still sat in the bags she'd brought them home in, behind the vacuum, and every time she opened the closet door, they seemed to mock her good intentions. Maybe, she thought to herself, when she returned home . . . She turned her head and saw a man standing a little way down the beach. He was older than she, maybe fifty or so, and his face was deeply tanned, as if he lived here year-round. He didn't appear to be moving—he simply stood in the water and let it wash over his legs—and she noticed his eyes were closed, as if he were enjoying the beauty of the world without having to watch it. He was wearing faded jeans, rolled up to his knees, and a comfortable shirt he hadn't bothered to tuck in. As she watched him, she suddenly wished she were a different kind of person. What would it be like to walk the beaches without another care in the world? How would it be to come to a quiet spot every day, away from the hustle and bustle of Boston, just to appreciate what life had to offer? She stepped out a little farther into the water and mimicked the man, hoping to feel whatever it was that he was feeling. But when she closed her eyes, the only thing she could

think about was Kevin. Lord knew she wanted to spend more time with him, and she definitely wanted to be more patient with him when they were together. She wanted to be able to sit and talk with Kevin, or play Monopoly with him, or simply watch TV with him without feeling the urge to get up from the couch to do something more important. There were times when she felt like a fraud when insisting to Kevin that he came first and that family was the most important thing he'd have. But the problem was that there was always something to do. Dishes to be washed, bathrooms to be cleaned, the cat box to be emptied; cars needed tune-ups, laundry needed to be done, and bills had to be paid. Even though Kevin helped a lot with his chores, he was almost as busy as she was with school and friends and all his other activities. As it was, magazines went straight to the garbage unread, letters went unwritten, and sometimes, in moments like these, she worried that her life was slipping past her. But how to change all that? " Take life one day at a time, " her mother always said, but her mother didn't have to work outside the home or raise a strong and confident yet caring son without benefit of a father. She didn't understand the pressures that Theresa faced on a daily basis. Neither did her younger sister, Janet, who had followed in the footsteps of their mother. She and her husband had been happily married for almost eleven years, with three wonderful girls to show for it. Edward wasn't a brilliant man, but he was honest, worked hard, and provided for his family well enough that Janet didn't have to work. There were times when Theresa thought she might like a life like that, even if it meant giving up her career. But that wasn't possible. Not since David and she divorced. Three years now, four if you counted the year they were separated. She didn't hate David for

what he had done, but her respect for him had been shattered. Adultery, whether a one-night stand or a long affair, wasn't something she could live with. Nor did it make her feel better that he never married the woman he'd been carrying on with for two years. The breach of trust was irreparable. David moved back to his home state of California a year after they separated and met Annette a few months later. His new wife was very religious, and little by little she got David interested in the church. David, a lifelong agnostic, had always seemed to be hungry for something more meaningful in his life. Now he attended church regularly and actually served as a marriage counselor along with the pastor. What could he possibly say to someone doing the same things he'd done, she often wondered, and how could he help others if he hadn't been able to control himself? She didn't know, didn't care, really. She was simply glad that he still took an interest in his son. Naturally, once she and David had split up, a lot of her friendships ended as well. Now that she was no longer part of a couple, she seemed to be out of place at friends' Christmas parties or backyard barbecues. A few friends remained, though, and she heard from them on her answering machine, suggesting that they set up a lunch date or come over for dinner. Occasionally she would go, but usually she made excuses not to. To her, none of those friendships seemed the way they used to, but then of course they weren't. Things changed, people changed, and the world went rolling along right outside the window. Since the divorce there had been only a handful of dates. It wasn't that she was unattractive. She was, or so she was often told. Her hair was dark brown, cut just above her shoulders, and straight as spider silk. Her eyes, the feature she was most often

complimented on, were brown with flecks of hazel that caught the light when she was outside. Since she ran daily, she was fit and didn't look as old as she was. She didn't feel old, either, but when she looked in the mirror lately, she seemed to see her age catching up with her. A new wrinkle around the corner of her eye, a gray hair that seemed to have grown overnight, a vaguely weary look from being constantly on the run. Her friends thought she was crazy. " You look better now than you did years ago, " they insisted, and she still noticed a few men eyeing her across the aisle in the supermarket. But she wasn't, nor ever would be, twenty-two again. Not that she would want to be, even if she could, unless, she sometimes thought to herself, she could take her more mature brain back with her. If she didn't, she'd probably get caught up with another David—a handsome man who craved the good things in life with the underlying assumption that he didn't have to play by the rules. But dammit, rules were important, especially the ones regarding marriage. They were the ones a person was never supposed to break. Her father and mother didn't break them, her sister and brother-in-law didn't, nor did Deanna and Brian. Why did he have to? And why, she wondered as she stood in the surf, did her thoughts always come back to this, even after all this time? She supposed that it had something to do with the fact that when the divorce papers finally arrived, she felt as if a little part of her had died. That initial anger she felt had turned to sadness, and now it had become something else, almost a dullness of sorts. Even though she was constantly in motion, it seemed as if nothing special ever happened to her anymore. Each day seemed exactly like the last, and she had trouble differentiating among them. One time, about a year ago, she sat at her desk

for fifteen minutes trying to remember the last spontaneous thing she'd done. She couldn't think of anything. The first few months had been hard on her. By then the anger had subsided and she didn't feel the urge to lash out at David and make him pay for what he had done. All she could do was feel sorry for herself. Even having Kevin around all the time did nothing to change the fact that she felt absolutely alone in the world. There was a short time when she couldn't sleep for more than a few hours a night, and now and then when she was at work, she would leave her desk and go sit in her car to cry for a while. Now, with three years gone by, she honestly didn't know if she would ever love someone again the way she had loved David. When David showed up at her sorority party at the beginning of her junior year, one look was all it took for her to know she wanted to be with him. Her young love had seemed so overwhelming, so powerful, then. She would stay awake thinking about him as she lay in her bed, and when she walked across campus, she smiled so often that other people would smile back whenever they saw her. But love like that doesn't last, at least that's what she found out. Over the years, a different kind of marriage emerged. She and David grew up, and apart. It became hard to remember the things that had first drawn them to each other. Looking back, Theresa felt that David became a different person altogether, although she couldn't pinpoint the moment when it all began to change. But anything can happen when the flame of a relationship goes out, and for him, it did. A chance meeting at a video store, a conversation that led to lunch and eventually to hotels throughout the greater Boston area. The unfair thing about the whole situation was that she still missed him sometimes, or rather the good parts about him. Being

married to David was comfortable, like a bed she'd slept in for years. She had been used to having another person around, just to talk to or listen. She had gotten used to waking up to the smell of brewing coffee in the morning, and she missed having another adult presence in the apartment. She missed a lot of things, but most of all she missed the intimacy that came from holding and whispering to another behind closed doors. Kevin wasn't old enough to understand this yet, and though she loved him deeply, it wasn't the same kind of love that she wanted right now. Her feeling for Kevin was a mother's love, probably the deepest, most holy love there is. Even now she liked to go into his room after he was asleep and sit on his bed just to look at him. Kevin always looked so peaceful, so beautiful, with his head on the pillow and the covers piled up around him. In the daytime he seemed to be constantly on the go, but at night his still, sleeping figure always brought back the feelings she'd had when he was still a baby. Yet even those wonderful feelings didn't change the fact that once she left his room, she would go downstairs and have a glass of wine with only Harvey the cat to keep her company. She still dreamed about falling in love with someone, of having someone take her in his arms and make her feel she was the only one who mattered. But it was hard, if not impossible, to meet someone decent these days. Most of the men she knew in their thirties were already married, and the ones that were divorced seemed to be looking for someone younger whom they could somehow mold into exactly what they wanted. That left older men, and even though she thought she could fall in love with someone older, she had her son to worry about. She wanted a man who would treat Kevin the way he should be treated, not simply as the unwanted

by-product of someone he desired. But the reality was that older men usually had older children; few welcomed the trials of raising an adolescent male in the 1990s. " I've already done my job, " a date had once informed her curtly. That had been the end of that relationship. She admitted that she also missed the physical intimacy that came from loving and trusting and holding someone else. She hadn't been with a man since she and David divorced. There had been opportunities, of course—finding someone to sleep with was never difficult for an attractive woman—but that simply wasn't her style. She hadn't been raised that way and didn't intend to change now. Sex was too important, too special, to be shared with just anyone. In fact, she had slept with only two men in her life—David, of course, and Chris, the first real boyfriend she'd ever had. She didn't want to add to the list simply for the sake of a few minutes of pleasure. So now, vacationing at Cape Cod, alone in the world and without a man anywhere in the foreseeable future, she wanted to do some things this week just for herself. Read some books, put her feet up, and have a glass of wine without the TV flickering in the background. Write some letters to friends she hadn't heard from in a while. Sleep late, eat too much, and jog in the mornings, before everyone got there to spoil it. She wanted to experience freedom again, if only for a short time. She also wanted to shop this week. Not at JCPenney or Sears or places that advertised Nike shoes and Chicago Bulls T-shirts, but at little trinket stores that Kevin found boring. She wanted to try on some new dresses and buy a couple that flattered her figure, just to make her feel she was still alive and vibrant. Maybe she would even get her hair done. She hadn't had a new style in years, and she was tired of looking the same every day. And if a nice guy

happened to ask her out this week, maybe she'd go, just to have an excuse to wear the new things she bought. With a somewhat renewed sense of optimism, she looked to see if the man with the rolled-up jeans was still there, but he had gone as quietly as he had come. And she was ready to go as well. Her legs had stiffened in the cool water, and sitting down to put on her shoes was a little more difficult than she expected. Since she didn't have a towel, she hesitated for a moment before putting on her socks, then decided she didn't have to. She was on vacation at the beach. No need for shoes or socks. She carried them with her as she started toward the house. She walked close to the water's edge and saw a large rock half-buried in the sand, a few inches from a spot where the early morning tide had reached its highest point. Strange, she thought to herself, it seemed out of place here. As she approached, she noticed something different about the way it looked. It was smooth and long, for one thing, and as she drew nearer she realized it wasn't a rock at all. It was a bottle, probably discarded by a careless tourist or one of the local teens who liked to come here at night. She looked over her shoulder and saw a garbage can chained to the lifeguard tower and decided to do her good deed for the day. When she reached it, however, she was surprised to see that it was corked. She picked it up, holding it into better light, and saw a note inside wrapped with yarn, standing on its end. For a second she felt her heart quicken as another memory came back to her. When she was eight years old and vacationing in Florida with her parents, she and another girl had once sent a letter via the sea, but she'd never received a reply. The letter was simple, a child's letter, but when she returned home, she remembered racing to the mailbox for weeks afterward,

hoping that someone had found it and sent a letter to her from where the bottle washed up. When nothing ever came, disappointment set in, the memory fading gradually until it became nothing at all. But now it all came back to her. Who had been with her that day? A girl about her age . . . Tracy? . . . no . . . Stacey? . . . yes, Stacey! Stacey was her name! She had blond hair . . . she was staying with her grandparents for the summer . . . and . . . and . . . and the memory stopped there, with nothing else coming no matter how hard she tried. She began to pull at the cork, almost expecting it to be the same bottle she had sent, although she knew that couldn't be. It was probably from another child, though, and if it requested a reply, she was going to send it. Maybe along with a small gift from the Cape and a postcard as well. The cork was wedged in tightly, and her fingers slipped as she tried to open it. She couldn't get a very good grip. She dug her short fingernails into the exposed cork and twisted the bottle slowly. Nothing. She switched hands and tried again. Tightening her grip, she put the bottle between her legs for more leverage, and just as she was about to give up, the cork moved a little. Suddenly renewed, she changed back to her original hands . . . squeezed . . . twisting the bottle slowly . . . more cork . . . and suddenly it loosened and the remaining portion slipped out easily. She tipped the bottle upside-down and was surprised when the note dropped to the sand by her feet almost immediately. When she leaned over to pick it up, she noticed it was tightly bound, which was why it slid out so easily. She untied the yarn carefully, and the first thing that struck her as she unrolled the message was the paper. This was no child's stationery. It was expensive paper, thick and sturdy, with a silhouette of a sailing ship embossed in the upper right hand

corner. And the paper itself was crinkled, aged looking, almost as if it had been in the water for a hundred years. She caught herself holding her breath. Maybe it was old. It could be—there were stories about bottles washing up after a hundred years at sea, so that could be the case now. Maybe she had a real artifact here. But as she scrutinized the writing itself, she saw that she was mistaken. There was a date on the upper left corner of the paper. July 22, 1997. A little more than three weeks ago. Three weeks? That's all? She looked a little further. The message was long—it covered the front and back sides of the paper—and it didn't seem to request any reply of sorts. A quick glance showed no address or phone number anywhere, but she supposed it could have been written into the letter itself. She felt a twinge of curiosity as she held the message in front of her, and it was then, in the rising sunlight of a hot New England day, that she first read the letter that would change her life forever. July 22, 1997 My Dearest Catherine, I miss you, my darling, as I always do, but today is especially hard because the ocean has been singing to me, and the song is that of our life together. I can almost feel you beside me as I write this letter, and I can smell the scent of wildflowers that always reminds me of you. But at this moment, these things give me no pleasure. Your visits have been coming less often, and I feel sometimes as if the greatest part of who I am is slowly slipping away. I am trying, though. At night when I am alone, I call for you, and whenever my ache seems to be the greatest, you still seem to find a way to return to me. Last night, in my dreams, I saw you on the pier near Wrightsville Beach. The wind was blowing through your hair, and your eyes held the fading sunlight. I am struck as I see you leaning against the rail. You are beautiful, I think as I

see you, a vision that I can never find in anyone else. I slowly begin to walk toward you, and when you finally turn to me, I notice that others have been watching you as well. " Do you know her? " they ask me in jealous whispers, and as you smile at me, I simply answer with the truth. " Better than my own heart. " I stop when I reach you and take you in my arms. I long for this moment more than any other. It is what I live for, and when you return my embrace, I give myself over to this moment, at peace once again. I raise my hand and gently touch your cheek and you tilt your head and close your eyes. My hands are hard and your skin is soft, and I wonder for a moment if you'll pull back, but of course you don't. You never have, and it is at times like this that I know what my purpose is in life. I am here to love you, to hold you in my arms, to protect you. I am here to learn from you and to receive your love in return. I am here because there is no other place to be. But then, as always, the mist starts to form as we stand close to one another. It is a distant fog that rises from the horizon, and I find that I grow fearful as it approaches. It slowly creeps in, enveloping the world around us, fencing us in as if to prevent escape. Like a rolling cloud, it blankets everything, closing, until there is nothing left but the two of us. I feel my throat begin to close and my eyes well up with tears because I know it is time for you to go. The look you give me at that moment haunts me. I feel your sadness and my own loneliness, and the ache in my heart that had been silent for only a short time grows stronger as you release me. And then you spread your arms and step back into the fog because it is your place and not mine. I long to go with you, but your only response is to shake your head because we both know that is impossible. And I watch with breaking heart as you slowly fade away. I

find myself straining to remember everything about this moment, everything about you. But soon, always too soon, your image vanishes and the fog rolls back to its faraway place and I am alone on the pier and I do not care what others think as I bow my head and cry and cry and cry. Garrett CHAPTER 2 " Have you been crying? " Deanna asked as Theresa stepped onto the back deck, carrying both the bottle and the message. In her confusion, she had forgotten to throw the bottle away. Theresa felt embarrassed and wiped her eyes as Deanna put down the newspaper and rose from her seat. Though she was overweight—and had been since Theresa had known her—she moved quickly around the table, her face registering concern. " Are you okay? What happened out there? Are you hurt? " She bumped into one of the chairs as she reached out and took Theresa's hand. Theresa shook her head. " No, nothing like that. I just found this letter and . . . I don't know, after I read it I couldn't help it. " " A letter? What letter? Are you sure you're okay? " Deanna's free hand gestured compulsively as she asked the questions. " I'm fine, really. The letter was in a bottle. I found it washed up on the beach. When I opened it and read it . . . " She trailed off, and Deanna's face lightened just a bit. " Oh . . . that's good. For a second I thought something awful happened. Like someone had attacked you or something. " Theresa brushed away a strand of hair that had blown onto her face and smiled at her concern. " No, the letter just really hit me. It's silly, I know. I shouldn't have been so emotional. And I'm sorry for giving you a scare. " " Oh, pooh, " Deanna said, shrugging. " Nothing to be sorry about. I'm just glad you're okay. " She paused for a moment. " You said the letter made you cry? Why? What did it say? " Theresa wiped her eyes, handed the letter to Deanna, and

walked over to the wrought-iron table where Deanna had been sitting. Still feeling a bit ridiculous about crying, she did her best to compose herself. Deanna read the letter slowly, and when she finished, she looked up at Theresa. Her eyes too were watering. It wasn't just her, after all. " It's . . . it's beautiful, " Deanna finally said. " It's one of the most touching things I've ever read. " " That's what I thought. " " And you found it washed up on the beach? When you were running? " Theresa nodded. " I don't know how it could have washed up there. The bay is sheltered from the rest of the ocean, and I've never heard of Wrightsville Beach. " " I don't know, either, but it looked like it had washed up last night. I almost walked by it at first before I noticed what it was. " Deanna ran her finger over the writing and paused for a moment. " I wonder who they are. And why was it sealed in a bottle? " " I don't know. " " Aren't you curious? " The fact was that Theresa was indeed curious. Immediately after reading it, she had read it again, then a third time. What would it be like, she mused, to have someone love her that way? " A little. But so what? There's no way we'll ever know. " " What are you going to do with it? " " Keep it, I guess. I haven't really thought about it that much. " " Hmmm, " Deanna said with an indecipherable smile. Then, " How was your jog? " Theresa sipped a glass of juice she had poured. " It was good. The sun was really something when it came up. It looked like the world was glowing. " " That's just because you were dizzy from lack of oxygen. Jogging does that to you. " Theresa smiled, amused. " So, I take it you won't come with me this week. " Deanna reached for her cup of coffee with a doubtful look on her face. " Not a chance. My exercise is limited to vacuuming the house every weekend. Can you picture me out there, huffing

and puffing? I'd probably have a heart attack. " " It's refreshing once you get used to it. " " That may be true, but I'm not young and svelte like you are. The only time I can remember running at all was when I was a kid and the neighbor's dog got out of the yard. I was running so fast, I almost wet my pants. " Theresa laughed out loud. " So, what's on the agenda today? " " I thought we'd do a little shopping and have lunch in town. Are you up for something like that? " " That's what I was hoping you'd say. " The two women talked about the places they might go. Then Deanna got up and went inside for another cup of coffee and Theresa watched her as she left. Deanna was fifty-eight and round faced, with hair that was slowly turning to gray. She kept it cut short, dressed without an excess of vanity, and was, Theresa decided, easily the best person she knew. She was knowledgeable about music and art, and at work, the recordings of Mozart or Beethoven were always flooding out of her office into the chaos of the newsroom. She lived in a world of optimism and humor, and everyone who knew her adored her. When Deanna came back to the table, she sat down and looked out across the bay. " Isn't this the most beautiful place you've ever seen? " " Yes, it is. I'm glad you invited me. " " You needed it. You would have been absolutely alone in that apartment of yours. " " You sound like my mother. " " I'll take that as a compliment. " Deanna reached across the table and picked up the letter again. As she perused it her eyebrows raised, but she said nothing. To Theresa, it looked as though the letter had triggered something in her memory. " What is it? " " I just wonder . . . , " she said quietly. " Wonder what? " " Well, when I was inside, I got to thinking about this letter. I'm wondering if we should run this in your column this week. " " What are you

talking about?" Deanna leaned across the table. "Just what I said—I think we should run this letter in your column this week. I'm sure other people would love to read it. It really is unusual. People need to read something like this every once in a while. And this is so touching. I can picture a hundred women cutting it out and taping it to their refrigerators so their husbands can see it when they get home from work." "We don't even know who they are. Don't you think we should get their permission first?" "That's just the point. We can't. I can talk to the attorney at the paper, but I'm sure it's legal. We won't use their real names, and as long as we don't take credit for writing it or divulge where it might be from, I'm sure there wouldn't be a problem." "I know it's probably legal, but I'm not sure if it's right. I mean, this is a very personal letter. I'm not sure it should be spread around so that everyone can read it." "It's a human interest story, Theresa. People love those sorts of things. Besides, there's nothing in there that might be embarrassing to someone. This is a beautiful letter. And remember, this Garrett person sent it in a bottle in the ocean. He had to know it would wash up somewhere." Theresa shook her head. "I don't know, Deanna . . ." "Well, think about it. Sleep on it if you have to. I think it's a great idea." *** Theresa did think about the letter as she undressed and got in the shower. She found herself wondering about the man who wrote it—Garrett, if that was his real name. And who, if anyone, was Catherine? His lover or his wife, obviously, but she wasn't around anymore. Was she dead, she wondered, or did something else happen that forced them apart? And why was it sealed in a bottle and set adrift? The whole thing was strange. Her reporter's instincts took over then, and she suddenly thought that the message might not mean anything. It

could be someone who wanted to write a love letter but didn't have anyone to send it to. It could even have been sent by someone who got some sort of vicarious thrill by making lonely women cry on distant beaches. But as the words rolled through her head again, she realized that those possibilities were unlikely. The letter obviously came from the heart. And to think that a man wrote it! In all her years, she had never received a letter even close to that. Touching sentiments sent her way had always been emblazoned with Hallmark greeting card logos. David had never been much of a writer, nor had anyone else she had dated. What would such a man be like? she wondered. Would he be as caring in person as the letter seemed to imply? She lathered and rinsed her hair, the questions slipping from her mind as the cool water rolled down her body. She washed the rest of her body with a washcloth and moisturizing soap, spent longer in the shower than she had to, and finally stepped out of the stall. She looked at herself in the mirror as she toweled off. Not too bad for a thirty-six-year-old with an adolescent son, she thought to herself. Her breasts had always been smallish, and though it had bothered her when she was younger, she was glad now because they hadn't started to sag or droop like those of other women her age. Her stomach was flat, and her legs were long and lean from all the exercise over the years. Nor did the crow's-feet around the corners of her eyes seem to show as much, though that didn't make any sense. All in all, she was pleased with how she looked this morning, and she attributed her unusually easy acceptance of herself to being on vacation. After putting on a little makeup, she dressed in beige shorts, a sleeveless white blouse, and brown sandals. It would be hot and humid in another hour, and she wanted to be comfortable

as she walked around Provincetown. She looked out the bathroom window, saw that the sun had risen even higher, and made a note to pick up some sunscreen. Her skin would burn if she didn't, and she'd learned from experience that a sunburn was one of the quickest ways to ruin a beach trip. Outside on the deck, Deanna had set breakfast on the table. There was cantaloupe and grapefruit, along with toasted bagels. After taking her seat, she spread some low-fat cream cheese on them- Deanna was on one of her endless diets again-and the two of them talked for a long while. Brian was out golfing, as he would be every day this week, and he had to go in the early morning because he was on some sort of medication that Deanna said " does awful things to his skin if he spends too much time in the sun. " Brian and Deanna had been together thirty-six years. College sweethearts, they'd married the summer after graduation, right after Brian accepted a job with an accounting firm in downtown Boston. Eight years later Brian became a partner and they bought a spacious house in Brookline, where they had lived alone for the past twenty-eight years. They had always wanted children, but after six years of marriage Deanna had yet to become pregnant. They went to see a gynecologist and discovered that Deanna's fallopian tubes had been scarred and that having a child was impossible. They tried to adopt for several years, but the list seemed never-ending, and they eventually gave up hope. Then came the dark years, she once confided to Theresa, a time when the marriage almost failed. But their commitment, though shaken, remained solid, and Deanna turned to work to fill the void in her life. She started at the Boston Times when women were rare and gradually worked her way up the corporate ladder. When she became managing editor ten

years ago, she began to take women reporters under her wing. Theresa had been her first student. After Deanna had gone upstairs to shower, Theresa looked through the paper briefly, then checked her watch. She rose from her seat and went to the phone to dial David's number. It was still early there, only seven o'clock, but she knew the whole family would be awake by now. Kevin always rose at the crack of dawn, and for once she was thankful that someone else had to share in that wonderful experience. She paced back and forth as the phone rang a few times before Annette picked up. Theresa could hear the TV in the background and the sound of a crying baby. "Hi. It's Theresa. Is Kevin around?" "Oh, hi. Of course he's here. Hold on for just a second." The phone clunked down on the counter and Theresa listened as Annette called for him: "Kevin, it's for you. Theresa's on the phone." The fact that she wasn't referred to as Kevin's mom hurt more than she expected, but she didn't have time to dwell on it. Kevin was out of breath when he reached the phone. "Hey, Mom. How're you doing? How's your vacation?" She felt a pang of loneliness at the sound of his voice. It was still high, childlike, but she knew it was only a matter of time before it changed. "It's beautiful, but I only got here yesterday night. I haven't done much except for jogging this morning." "Were there a lot of people on the beach?" "No, but I saw a few people heading out as I finished. Hey, when do you take off with your dad?" "In a couple days. His vacation doesn't start until Monday, so that's when we leave. Right now he's getting ready to go into the office to do some work so that he'll be free and clear by the time we go. Do you want to talk to him?" "No, I don't have to. I was just calling to tell you that I hope you'll have a good time." "It's going to be a blast. I saw a

brochure on the river trip. Some of the rapids look pretty cool. " " Well, you be careful. " " Mom, I'm not a kid anymore. " " I know. Just reassure your old-fashioned mother. " " Okay, I promise. I'll wear my life jacket the whole time. " He paused for a moment. " You know, we're not going to have a phone, though, so we won't be able to talk until I get back. " " I figured as much. It should be a lot of fun, though. " " It'll be awesome. I wish that you could come with us. We'd have a great time. " She closed her eyes for a moment before responding, a trick her therapist had taught her. Whenever Kevin said something about the three of them being together again, she always tried to make sure she said nothing that she'd later regret. Her voice sounded as optimistic as she could make it. " You and your dad need some time alone. I know he's missed you a lot. You've got some catching up to do, and he's been looking forward to this trip as long as you have. " There, that wasn't so hard. " Did he tell you that? " " Yes. A few times. " Kevin was quiet. " I'll miss you, Mom. Can I call you as soon as I get back to tell you about the trip? " " Of course. You can call me anytime. I'd love to hear all about it. " Then, " I love you, Kevin. " " I love you too, Mom. " She hung up the phone, feeling both happy and sad, which was how she usually felt whenever they talked on the phone when he was with his father. " Who was that? " Deanna said from behind her. She had come down the stairs wearing a yellow tiger-striped blouse, red shorts, white socks, and a pair of Reeboks. Her outfit screamed " I'm a tourist! " and Theresa did her best to keep a straight face. " It was Kevin. I gave him a call. " " Is he doing okay? " She opened the closet and grabbed a camera to complete the ensemble. " He's fine. He leaves in a couple of days. " " Good, that's good. " She draped the camera around her

neck. " And now that that's taken care of, we have some shopping to do. We've got to get you looking like a new woman. " *** Shopping with Deanna was an experience. Once they got to Provincetown, they spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon in a variety of shops. Theresa bought three new outfits and a new swimsuit before Deanna dragged her into a place called Nightingales, a lingerie shop. Deanna went absolutely wild in there. Not for herself, of course, but for Theresa. She would pick up lacy, see-through underwear and matching bras off the racks and hold them up for Theresa to evaluate. " This looks pretty steamy, " she'd say, or, " You don't have any this color, do you? " Naturally there would be others around as she blurted these things out, and Theresa couldn't help but laugh whenever she did it. Deanna's lack of inhibition was one of the things that Theresa loved most about her. She really didn't care what other people thought, and Theresa often wished she could be more like her. After taking two of Deanna's suggestions—she was on vacation, after all—the two spent a couple of minutes in the record store. Deanna wanted the latest CD from Harry Connick Jr.—“ He's cute, " she said in explanation—and Theresa bought a jazz CD of one of John Coltrane's earlier recordings. When they returned to the house, Brian was reading the paper in the living room. " Hey there. I was beginning to get worried about you two. How was your day? " " It was good, " Deanna answered. " We had lunch in Provincetown, then did a little shopping. How did your game go today? " " Pretty well. If I hadn't bogeyed the last two holes, I would have shot an eighty. " " Well, you're just going to have to play a little more until you get it right. " Brian laughed. " You won't mind? " " Of course not. " Brian smiled as he rustled the paper, content with the fact that

he could spend a lot of time on the course this week. Recognizing his signal that he wanted to get back to reading, Deanna whispered in Theresa's ear, "Take it from me. Let a man play golf and he'll never raise a fuss about anything. " *** Theresa left the two of them alone for the rest of the afternoon. Since the day was still warm, she changed into the new suit she had bought, grabbed a towel and small fold-up chair and People magazine, then went to the beach. She thumbed idly through People, reading a few articles here and there, not really interested in what was happening to the rich and famous. All around her she could hear the laughter of children as they splashed in the water and filled their pails with sand. Off to one side of her were two young boys and a man, presumably their father, building a castle near the water's edge. The sound of the lapping waves was soothing. She put down the magazine and closed her eyes, angling her face toward the sun. She wanted a little color by the time she got back to work, if for no other reason than to look as though she had taken some time to do absolutely nothing. Even at work she was regarded as the type who was always on the go. If she wasn't writing her weekly column, she was working on the column for the Sunday editions, or researching on the Internet, or poring over child development journals. She had subscriptions at work to every major parenting magazine and every childhood magazine, as well as others devoted to working women. She also subscribed to medical journals, scanning them regularly for topics that might be suitable. The column itself was never predictable—perhaps that was one of the reasons it was so successful. Sometimes she responded to questions, other times she reported on the latest child development data and what it meant. A lot of columns

were about the joys that came with raising children, while others described the pitfalls. She wrote of the struggles of single motherhood, a subject that seemed to touch a nerve in the lives of Boston women. Unexpectedly, her column had turned her into a local celebrity of sorts. But even though it was fun in the beginning to see her picture above her column, or to receive invitations to private parties, she always had so much going on, she didn't seem to have time to enjoy it. Now she regarded it as just another feature of the job—one that was nice but didn't really mean much to her. After an hour in the sun, Theresa realized she was hot and walked to the water. She waded in to her hips, then went under as a small wave approached. The cool water made her gasp when her head came up, and a man standing next to her chuckled. " Refreshing, isn't it? " he said, and she agreed with a nod as she crossed her arms. He was tall with dark hair the same color as hers, and for a second she wondered if he was flirting with her. But the children nearby quickly ended that illusion with shouts of " Dad! " and after a few more minutes in the water, she got out and walked back to her chair. The beach was clearing out. She packed up her things as well and started back. At the house, Brian was watching golf on television and Deanna was reading a novel with a picture of a young, handsome lawyer on the cover. Deanna looked up from her book. " How was the beach? " " It was great. The sun felt wonderful, but the water kind of shocks you when you go under. " " It always does. I don't see how people can stand to be in it for more than a few minutes. " Theresa hung the towel on a rack by the door. She spoke over her shoulder. " How's the book? " Deanna turned the book over in her hands and glanced at the cover. " Wonderful. It reminds me of how Brian used to look a

few years back. " Brian grunted without looking away from the television. " Huh? " " Nothing, sweetheart. Just reminiscing. " She turned her attention back to Theresa. Her eyes were shining. " Are you up for some gin rummy? " Deanna loved card games of any kind. She was in two bridge clubs, played hearts like a champion, and kept a record of every time she won a game of solitaire. But gin rummy had always been the game that she and Theresa played when they had time, because it was the only game that Theresa actually stood a chance of winning. " Sure. " Deanna folded the page with glee, put down her book, and rose from her seat. " I hoped you'd say that. The cards are on the table outside. " Theresa wrapped the towel around her suit and went outside to the table where they had eaten breakfast earlier. Deanna followed shortly with two cans of diet Coke and sat across from her as she picked up the deck. She shuffled the cards and dealt them. Deanna looked up from her hand. " It looks like you got a little color in your cheeks. The sun must have been pretty intense. " Theresa started organizing her cards. " I felt like I was baking. " " Did you meet anyone interesting? " " Not really. Just read and relaxed in the sun. Most everyone there was with their families. " " That's too bad. " " Why do you say that? " " Well, I was kind of hoping you'd meet someone special this week. " " You're special. " " You know what I mean. I was kind of hoping you'd find yourself a man this week. One that took your breath away. " Theresa looked up in surprise. " What brought that on? " " The sun, the ocean, the breezes. I don't know. Maybe it's the extra radiation soaking through my brain. " " I haven't really been looking, Deanna. " " Never? " " Not much, anyway. " " Ah ha! " " Don't make a big deal out of it. It hasn't been that long since the divorce. " Theresa put

down the six of diamonds, and Deanna picked it up before discarding the three of clubs. Deanna spoke in the same tone her mother did when they talked about the same thing. " It's been almost three years. Don't you have anyone on the back burner that you've been hiding from me? " " No. " " No one? " Deanna picked from the stack of cards and discarded a four of hearts. " Nope. But it's not only me, you know. It's hard to meet people these days. It's not like I have time to go out and socialize. " " I know that, I really do. It's just that you've got so much to offer someone. I know there's someone out there for you somewhere. " " I'm sure there is. I just haven't met him yet. " " Are you even looking? " " When I can. But my boss is a real stickler, you know. Won't give me a moment's rest. " " Maybe I should talk to her. " " Maybe you should, " Theresa agreed, and they both laughed. Deanna picked from the stack and discarded a seven of spades. " Have you been dating at all? " " Not really. Not since Matt What's-his-name told me he didn't want a woman with children. " Deanna scowled for a moment. " Sometimes men can be real jerks, and he was a perfect example. He's the kind of guy whose head belongs mounted on a wall with a plaque that reads ' Typical Egocentric Male.' But they aren't all like that. There are lots of real men out there-men who could fall in love with you at the drop of a hat. " Theresa picked up the seven and discarded a four of diamonds. " That's why I like you, Deanna. You say the sweetest things. " Deanna picked from the stack. " It's true, though. Believe me. You're pretty, you're successful, you're intelligent. I could find a dozen men who would love to go out with you. " " I'm sure you could. But that doesn't mean that I would like them. " " You're not even giving it a chance. " Theresa shrugged. " Maybe not. But that

doesn't mean I'll die alone in some boardinghouse for old maids later in life. Believe me, I'd love to fall in love again. I'd love to meet a wonderful guy and live happily ever after. I just can't make it a priority right now. Kevin and work take all my time as it is. " Deanna didn't reply for a moment. She threw down a two of spades. " I think you're scared. " " Scared? " " Absolutely. Not that there's anything wrong with that. " " Why do you say that? " " Because I know how much David hurt you, and I know I'd be frightened of the same thing happening again if it were me. It's human nature. Once burned, twice shy, the old saying goes. There's a lot of truth in that. " " There probably is. But I'm sure if the right man comes along, I'll know it. I have faith. " " What kind of man are you looking for? " " I don't know. . . . " " Sure you do. Everyone knows a little bit about what they want. " " Not everyone. " " Sure you do. Start with the obvious, or if you can't do that, start with what you don't want- like . . . is it all right if he's in a motorcycle gang? " Theresa smiled and picked from the stack. Her hand was coming together. Another card and she'd be done. She threw down the jack of hearts. " Why are you so interested? " " Oh, just humor an old friend, will you? " â