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# NICHOLAS SPARKS

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Message in  
a Bottle



*With a foreword by  
Anthony Johnson and an  
afterword by the author*

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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.

# **Message In A Bottle**



# 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.

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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