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Warner Books

Time Warner Book Group
1271 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

Visit our Web site at www.twbookmark.com

Printed in the United States of America

Originally published in hardcover by Warner Books

First Paperback Printing: August 2001

Reissued: February 2006

20 19 18 17 16 15

Acknowledgments

Again, I'd like to thank my wife, Cathy, who had to be more patient with me than usual while writing this novel. What a wild eleven years we've shared, huh?

My three sons (Miles, Ryan, and Landon) also deserve my thanks, simply because they help me keep everything in perspective. It's fun watching you guys grow up.

My agent, Theresa Park, of Sanford Greenburger Associates, has been with me every step of the way, and it's been my good fortune to have worked with her. I can never say it enough: Thank you so much for everything—you're the best!

My editor, Jamie Raab, of Warner Books, has also been great to work with—again! What can I say? I'm lucky to have your guidance—don't ever believe that I take it for granted. I hope we work together for a long, long time.

Many thanks to Larry Kirshbaum, the number one guy at Warner Books, who also happens to be a really nice guy, and Maureen Egen, who is not only a gem, but a brilliant gem. You both changed my life for the better and I'll never forget it.

And finally, a wineglass raised in toast to the rest of those people who help me every step of the way: Jennifer Romanello, Emi Battaglia, Edna Farley, and the rest of the publicity department at Warner; Flag, who designed all my fabulous book covers; Scott Schwimer, my entertainment attorney; Howie Sanders and Richard Green at United Talent Agency, two of the best at what they do; Denise DiNovi, the fabulous producer of *Message in a Bottle* (the main character in this novel is named for her, by the way); Courtenay Valenti and Lorenzo Di Bonaventura at Warner Bros.; Lynn Harris at New Line Cinema; Mark Johnson, producer.

Prologue

It would later be called one of the most violent storms in North Carolina history. Because it occurred in 1999, some of the most superstitious citizens considered it an omen, the first step toward the end of time. Others simply shook their heads and said that they knew something like that would happen sooner or later. In all, nine documented tornadoes would touch down that evening in the eastern part of the state, destroying nearly thirty homes in the process. Telephone lines lay strewn across roads, transformers blazed without anyone to stop them. Thousands of trees were felled, flash floods swept over banks of three major rivers, and lives changed forever with one fell swoop of Mother Nature.

It had begun in an instant. One minute it was cloudy and dark, but not unusually so; in the next, lightning, gale-force winds, and blinding rain exploded from the early summer sky. The system had blown in from the northwest and was crossing the state at nearly forty

miles an hour. All at once, radio stations crackled with emergency warnings, documenting the storm's ferocity. People who could take cover inside, but people on the highway, like Denise Holton, had no place to go. Now that she was firmly in its midst, there was little she could do. Rain fell so hard in places that traffic slowed to five miles an hour and Denise held the wheel with white knuckles, her face a mask of concentration. At times it was impossible to see the road through the windshield, but stopping meant certain disaster because of the people on the highway behind her. They wouldn't be able to see her car with time enough to stop. Pulling the shoulder strap of the seat belt over her head, she leaned over the steering wheel, looking for the dotted lines in the road, catching a glimpse here and there. There were long stretches during which she felt as if she were driving on instinct alone, because nothing was visible at all. Like an ocean wave, rain poured across her windshield, obscuring nearly everything. Her headlights seemed absolutely useless, and she wanted to stop, but where? Where would it be safe? On the side of the highway? People were swerving all over the road, as blind as she was. She made an instant decision—somehow, moving seemed safer. Her eyes darted from the road, to the taillights in front of her, to the rearview mirror; she hoped and prayed that everyone else on the road was doing the same thing. Looking for anything that would keep them safe. Anything at all.

Then, just as suddenly as it had started, the storm weakened and it was possible to see again. She suspected she'd reached the front edge of the system;

everyone on the road apparently guessed the same thing. Despite the slick conditions, cars began to speed up, racing to stay ahead of the front. Denise sped up as well, staying with them. Ten minutes later, the rains still evident but slowing even more, she glanced at the gas gauge and felt a knot form in her stomach. She knew she had to stop soon. She didn't have enough gas to make it home.

Minutes went by.

The flow of traffic kept her vigilant. Thanks to a new moon, there was little light in the sky. She glanced at the dashboard again. The needle on the gas gauge was deep into the red shaded area. Despite her fears about staying ahead of the storm, she slowed the car, hoping to conserve what was left, hoping it would be enough. Hoping to stay ahead of the storm.

People began to race by, the spray against her windshield wreaking havoc with her wipers. She pressed onward.

Another ten minutes passed before she heaved a sigh of relief. Gas, less than a mile away, according to the sign. She put on her blinker, merged, rode in the right-hand lane, exited. She stopped at the first open pump.

She'd made it but knew the storm was still on its way. It would reach this area within the next fifteen minutes, if not sooner. She had time, but not a lot.

As quickly as she could, Denise filled the tank and then helped Kyle out of his car seat. Kyle held her hand as they went inside to pay; she'd insisted on it because of the number of cars at the station. Kyle was shorter than the door handle, and as she walked in she

noticed how crowded it was. It seemed that everyone driving on the highway had had the same idea—*get gas while you can*. Denise grabbed a can of Diet Coke, her third of the day, then searched the refrigerators along the back wall. Near the corner she found strawberry-flavored milk for Kyle. It was getting late, and Kyle loved milk before bedtime. Hopefully, if she could stay ahead of the storm, he'd sleep most of the way back.

By the time she went to pay she was fifth in line. The people in front of her looked impatient and tired, as if they couldn't understand how it could be so crowded at this hour. Somehow it seemed as if they'd forgotten about the storm. But from the looks in their eyes, she knew they hadn't. Everyone in the store was on edge. *Hurry up*, their expressions said, *we need to get out of here*.

Denise sighed. She could feel the tension in her neck, and she rolled her shoulders. It didn't help much. She closed her eyes, rubbed them, opened them again. In the aisles behind her, she heard a mother arguing with her young son. Denise glanced over her shoulder. The boy appeared to be about the same age as Kyle, four and a half or so. His mother seemed as stressed as Denise felt. She was holding on tightly to her son's arm. The child stomped his foot.

"But I want the cupcakes!" he whined.

His mother stood her ground. "I said no. You've had enough junk today."

"But *you're* getting something."

After a moment Denise turned away. The line hadn't moved at all. What was taking so long? She peeked

around those in front of her, trying to figure it out. The lady at the cash register looked confused by the rush, and everyone in front of her, it seemed, wanted to pay with a credit card. Another minute crawled by, shrinking the line by one. By this time the mother and child got into line directly behind Denise, their argument continuing.

Denise put her hand on Kyle's shoulder. He was sipping his milk through a straw, standing quietly. She couldn't help but overhear the two people behind her.

"Aw, c'mon, Mom!"

"If you keep it up, you'll get a swat. We don't have time for this."

"But I'm hungry."

"Then you should have eaten your hot dog."

"I didn't want a hot dog."

And so it went. Three customers later Denise finally reached the register, opened her pocketbook, and paid with cash. She kept one credit card for emergencies but seldom, if ever, used it. For the clerk, making change seemed more difficult than swiping credit cards. She kept glancing up at the digital numbers on the register, trying to get it right. The argument between mother and son continued unabated. In time Denise finally received her change and put her pocketbook away, then turned toward the door. Knowing how hard it was for everyone tonight, she smiled at the mother behind her, as if to say, *Kids are tough sometimes, aren't they?*

In response, the woman rolled her eyes. "You're lucky," she said.

Denise looked at her curiously. "Excuse me?"

“I said you’re lucky.” She nodded toward her son. “This one here never shuts up.”

Denise glanced at the floor, nodded with tight lips, then turned and left the store. Despite the stress of the storm, despite the long day driving and her time at the evaluation center, all she could think about was Kyle. Walking toward the car, Denise suddenly felt the urge to cry.

“No,” she whispered to herself, “you’re the lucky one.”

Chapter 1

Why had this happened? Why, of all the children, was Kyle the one?

Back in the car after stopping for gas, Denise hit the highway again, staying ahead of the storm. For the next twenty minutes rain fell steadily but not ominously, and she watched the wipers push the water back and forth while she made her way back to Edenton, North Carolina. Her Diet Coke sat between the emergency brake and the driver's seat, and though she knew it wasn't good for her, she finished the last of it and immediately wished she'd bought another. The extra caffeine, she hoped, would keep her alert and focused on the drive, instead of on Kyle. But Kyle was always there.

Kyle. What could she say? He'd once been part of her, she'd heard his heart beating at twelve weeks, she'd felt his movements within her the last five months of her pregnancy. After his birth, while still in the delivery room, she took one look at him and couldn't believe there was anything more beautiful in

the world. That feeling hadn't changed, although she wasn't in any way a perfect mother. These days she simply did the best job she could, accepting the good with the bad, looking for joys in the little things. With Kyle, they were sometimes hard to find.

She'd done her best to be patient with him over the last four years, but it hadn't always been easy. Once, while he was still a toddler, she'd momentarily placed her hand over his mouth to quiet him, but he'd been screaming for over five hours after staying awake all night, and tired parents everywhere might find this a forgivable offense. After that, though, she'd done her best to keep her emotions in check. When she felt her frustration rising, she slowly counted to ten before doing anything; when that didn't work, she left the room to collect herself. Usually it helped, but this was both a blessing and a curse. It was a blessing because she knew that patience was necessary to help him; it was a curse because it made her question her own abilities as a parent.

Kyle had been born four years to the day after her mother had died of a brain aneurysm, and though not usually given to believing in signs, Denise could hardly regard that as a coincidence. Kyle, she felt sure, was a gift from God. Kyle, she knew, had been sent to replace her family. Other than him, she was alone in the world. Her father had died when she was four, she had no siblings, her grandparents on both sides had passed away. Kyle immediately became the sole recipient of the love she had to offer. But fate is strange, fate is unpredictable. Though she showered Kyle with attention, it somehow hadn't been enough. Now she led

a life she hadn't anticipated, a life where Kyle's daily progression was carefully logged in a notebook. Now she led a life completely dedicated to her son. Kyle, of course, didn't complain about the things they did every day. Kyle, unlike other children, never complained about anything. She glanced in the rearview mirror.

"What are you thinking about, sweetie?"

Kyle was watching the rain as it blew against the windows, his head turned sideways. His blanket was in his lap. He hadn't said anything since he'd been in the car, and he turned at the sound of her voice.

She waited for his response. But there was nothing.



Denise Holton lived in a house that had once been owned by her grandparents. After their deaths it had become her mother's, then eventually it had passed on to her. It wasn't much—a *small ramshackle building set on three acres*, built in the 1920s. The two bedrooms and the living room weren't too bad, but the kitchen was in dire need of modern appliances and the shower had a permanent leak. At both the front and back of the house the porches were sagging, and without the portable fan she sometimes felt as if she would bake to death, but because she could live there rent-free, it was exactly what she needed. It had been her home for the past three months.

Staying in Atlanta, the place she'd grown up, would have been impossible. Once Kyle was born, she'd used the money her mother had left her to stay at home with him. At the time, she considered it a temporary leave of absence. Once he was a little older, she had planned

to go back to teaching. The money, she knew, would run out eventually, and she had to earn a living. Besides, teaching was something she'd loved. She'd missed her students and fellow teachers after her first week away. Now, years later, she was still at home with Kyle and the world of teaching in a school was nothing but a vague and distant memory, something more akin to a dream than a reality. She couldn't remember a single lesson plan or the names of the students she had taught. If she didn't know better, she would have sworn that she'd never done it at all.

Youth offers the promise of happiness, but life offers the realities of grief. Her father, her mother, her grandparents—all gone before she turned twenty-one. At that point in her life she'd been to five different funeral homes yet legally couldn't enter a bar to wash the sorrow away. She'd suffered more than her fair share of challenges, but God, it seemed, couldn't stop at just that. Like Job's struggles, hers continued to go on. "Middle-class lifestyle?" *Not anymore.* "Friends you've grown up with?" *You must leave them behind.* "A job to enjoy?" *It is too much to ask.* And Kyle, the sweet, wonderful boy for whom all this was done—in many ways he was still a mystery to her.

Instead of teaching she worked the evening shift at a diner called Eights, a busy hangout on the outskirts of Edenton. The owner there, Ray Toler, was a sixty-something black man who'd run the place for thirty years. He and his wife had raised six kids, all of whom went to college. Copies of their diplomas hung along the back wall, and everyone who ate there knew about them. Ray made sure of that. He also liked to talk about

Denise. She was the only one, he liked to say, who'd ever handed him a résumé when interviewing for the job.

Ray was a man who understood poverty, a man who understood kindness, a man who understood how hard it was for single mothers. "In the back of the building, there's a small room," he'd said when he hired her. "You can bring your son with you, as long as he doesn't get in the way." Tears formed in her eyes when he showed it to her. There were two cots, a night-light, a place where Kyle would be safe. The next evening Kyle went to bed in that small room as soon as she started on her shift; hours later she loaded him in the car and took him back home. Since then that routine hadn't changed.

She worked four nights a week, five hours a shift, earning barely enough to get by. She'd sold her Honda for an old but reliable Datsun two years ago, pocketing the difference. That money, along with everything else from her mother, had long since been spent. She'd become a master of budgeting, a master of cutting corners. She hadn't bought new clothes for herself since the Christmas before last; though her furniture was decent, they were remnants from another life. She didn't subscribe to magazines, she didn't have cable television, her stereo was an old boom box from college. The last movie she'd seen on the silver screen was *Schindler's List*. She seldom made long-distance phone calls to her friends. She had \$238 in the bank. Her car was nineteen years old, with enough miles on the engine to have circled the world five times.

None of those things mattered, though. Only Kyle was important.

But never once had he told her that he loved her.



On those evenings she didn't work at the diner, Denise usually sat in the rocking chair on the porch out back, a book across her lap. She enjoyed reading outside, where the rise and fall of chirping crickets was somehow soothing in its monotony. Her home was surrounded by oak and cypress and mockernut hickory trees, all draped heavily in Spanish moss. Sometimes, when the moonlight slanted through them just right, shadows that looked like exotic animals splashed across the gravel walkway.

In Atlanta she used to read for pleasure. Her tastes ran the gamut from Steinbeck and Hemingway to Grisham and King. Though those types of books were available at the local library, she never checked them out anymore. Instead she used the computers near the reading room, which had free access to the Internet. She searched through clinical studies sponsored by major universities, printing the documents whenever she found something relevant. The files she kept had grown to nearly three inches wide.

On the floor beside her chair she had an assortment of psychological textbooks as well. Expensive, they'd made serious dents in her budget. Yet the hope was always there, and after ordering them, she waited anxiously for them to arrive. This time, she liked to think, she would find something that helped.

Once they came, she would sit for hours, studying the information. With the lamp a steady blaze behind her, she perused the information, things she'd usually read before. Still, she didn't rush. Occasionally she