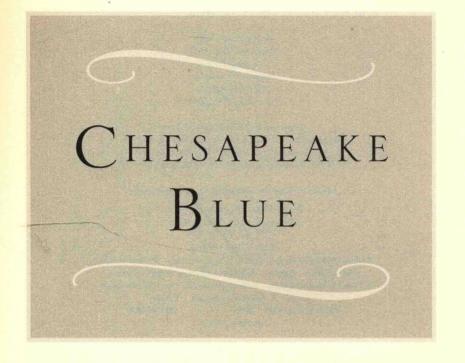
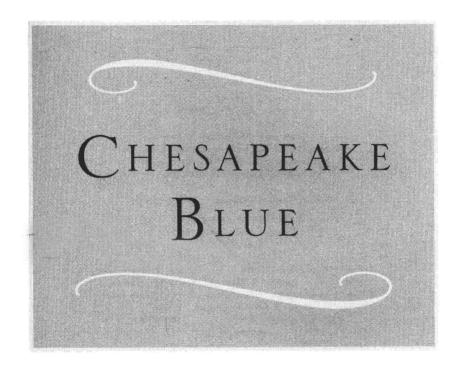
NORA ROBERTS



G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS NEW YORK

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ONE

HE WAS COMING HOME.

Maryland's Eastern Shore was a world of marshes and mudflats, of wide fields with row crops straight as soldiers. It was flatland rivers with sharp shoulders, and secret tidal creeks where the heron fed.

It was blue crab and the Bay, and the watermen who harvested them.

No matter where he'd lived, in the first miserable decade of his life, or in the last few years as he approached the end of his third decade, only the Shore had ever meant home.

There were countless aspects, countless memories of that home, and every one was as bright and brilliant in his mind as the sun that sparkled off the water of the Chesapeake.

As he drove across the bridge, his artist's eye wanted to capture that moment—the rich blue water and the boats that skimmed its surface, the quick white waves and the swoop of greedy gulls. The way the land skimmed its edge, and spilled back with its browns

and greens. All the thickening leaves of the gum and oak trees, with those flashes of color that were flowers basking in the warmth of spring.

He wanted to remember this moment just as he remembered the first time he'd crossed the bay to the Eastern Shore, a surly, frightened boy beside a man who'd promised him a life.

HE'D SAT in the passenger seat of the car, with the man he hardly knew at the wheel. He had the clothes on his back, and a few meager possessions in a paper sack.

His stomach had been tight with nerves, but he'd fixed what he thought was a bored look on his face and had stared out the window.

If he was with the old guy, he wasn't with her. That was as good a deal as he could get.

Besides, the old guy was pretty cool.

He didn't stink of booze or of the mints some of the assholes Gloria brought up to the dump they were living in used to cover it up. And the couple of times they'd been together, the old guy, Ray, had bought him a burger or pizza.

And he'd talked to him.

Adults, in his experience, didn't talk to kids. At them, around them, over them. But not to them.

Ray did. Listened, too. And when he'd asked, straight out, if he—just a kid—wanted to live with him, he hadn't felt that strangling fear or hot panic. He'd felt like maybe, just maybe, he was catching a break.

Away from her. That was the best part. The longer they drove, the farther away from her. If things got sticky, he could run. The guy was really old. Big, he was sure as shit big, but old. All that white hair, and that wide, wrinkled face.

He took quick, sidelong glances at it, began to draw the face in his mind.

His eyes were really blue, and that was kind of weird because so were his own.

He had a big voice, too, but when he talked it wasn't like yelling. It was kind of calm, even a little tired, maybe.

He sure looked tired now.

"Almost home," Ray said as they approached the bridge. "Hungry?"

"I dunno. Yeah, I guess."

"My experience, boys are always hungry. Raised three bottomless pits."

There was cheer in the big voice, but it was forced. The child might have been barely ten, but he knew the tone of falsehood.

Far enough away now, he thought. If he had to run. So he'd put the cards on the table and see what the fuck was what.

"How come you're taking me to your place?"

"Because you need a place."

"Get real. People don't do shit like that."

"Some do. Stella and I, my wife, we did shit like that."

"You tell her you're bringing me around?"

Ray smiled, but there was a sadness in it. "In my way. She died some time back. You'd've liked her. And she'd have taken one look at you and rolled up her sleeves."

He didn't know what to say about that. "What am I supposed to do when we get where we're going?"

"Live," Ray told him. "Be a boy. Go to school, get in trouble. I'll teach you to sail."

"On a boat?"

Now Ray laughed, a big booming sound that filled the car and for reasons the boy couldn't understand, untied the nerves in his belly. "Yeah, on a boat. Got a brainless puppy—I always get the brainless ones—I'm trying to housebreak. You can help me with that. You're gonna have chores, we'll figure that out. We'll lay down the rules, and you'll follow them. Don't think because I'm an old man I'm a pushover."

"You gave her money."

Ray glanced away from the road briefly and looked into eyes the same color as his own. "That's right. That's what she understands, from what I can see. She never understood you, did she, boy?"

Something was gathering inside him, a storm he didn't recognize as hope. "If you get pissed off at me, or tired of having me around, or just change your mind, you'll send me back. I won't go back."

They were over the bridge now, and Ray pulled the car to the shoulder of the road, shifted his bulk in the seat so they were face-to-face. "I'll get pissed off at you, and at my age I'm bound to get tired from time to time. But I'm making you a promise here and now, I'm giving you my word. I won't send you back."

"If she-"

"I won't let her take you back," Ray said, anticipating him. "No matter what I have to do. You're mine now. You're my family now. And you'll stay with me as long as that's what you want. A Quinn makes a promise," he added, and held out a hand, "he keeps it."

Seth looked at the offered hand, and his own sprang damp. "I don't like being touched."

Ray nodded. "Okay. But you've still got my word on it." He pulled back onto the road again, gave the boy one last glance. "Almost home," he said again.

Within months, Ray Quinn had died, but he'd kept his word. He'd kept it through the three men he'd made his sons. Those men had given the scrawny, suspicious and scarred young boy a life.

They had given him a home, and made him a man.

Cameron, the edgy, quick-tempered gypsy; Ethan, the patient, steady waterman; Phillip, the elegant, sharp-minded executive. They had stood for him, fought for him. They had saved him.

His brothers.

THE GILDED LIGHT of the late-afternoon sun sheened the marsh grass, the mudflats, the flat fields of row crops. With the windows down he caught the scent of water as he bypassed the little town of St. Christopher.

He'd considered swinging into town, heading first to the old brick boatyard. Boats by Quinn still custom-made wooden boats, and in the eighteen years since the enterprise had started—on a dream, on guile, on sweat—it had earned its reputation for quality and craftsmanship.

They were probably there, even now. Cam cursing as he finished up some fancywork in a cabin. Ethan quietly lapping boards. Phil, up in the office conjuring up some snazzy ad campaign.

He could go by Crawford's, pick up a six-pack. Maybe they'd

have a cold one, or more likely Cam would toss him a hammer and tell him to get his ass back to work.

He'd enjoy that, but it wasn't what was drawing him now. It wasn't what was pulling him down the narrow country road where the marsh still crept out of the shadows and the trees with their gnarled trunks spread leaves glossy with May.

Of all the places he'd seen—the great domes and spires of Florence, the florid beauty of Paris, the stunning green hills of Ireland—nothing ever caught at his throat, filled up his heart, like the old white house with its soft and faded blue trim that sat on a bumpy lawn that slid back into quiet water.

He pulled in the drive, behind the old white 'Vette that had been Ray and Stella Quinn's. The car looked as pristine as the day it had rolled off the showroom floor. Cam's doing, he thought. Cam would say it was a matter of showing proper respect for an exceptional machine. But it was all about Ray and Stella, all about family. All about love.

The lilac in the front yard was smothered with blooms. That was a matter of love, too, he reflected. He'd given Anna the little bush for Mother's Day when he was twelve.

She'd cried, he remembered. Big, beautiful brown eyes flooded with tears, laughing and swiping at them the whole time he and Cam planted it for her.

She was Cam's wife, and so that made Anna his sister. But inside, he thought now, where it counted, she was his mother.

The Quinns knew all about what was inside.

He got out of the car, into the lovely stillness. He was no longer a scrawny boy with oversized feet and a suspicious eye.

He'd grown into those feet. He was six-one with a wiry build. One that could go gawky if he neglected it. His hair had darkened and was more a bronzed brown than the sandy mop of his youth. He tended to neglect that as well and, running a hand through it now, winced as he recalled his intention to have it trimmed before leaving Rome.

The guys were going to rag on him about the little ponytail, which meant he'd have to keep it for a while, out of principle.

He shrugged and, dipping his hands into the pockets of his worn jeans, began to walk, scanning the surroundings. Anna's flowers, the rockers on the front porch, the woods that haunted the side of the house and where he'd run wild as a boy.

The old dock swaying over the water, and the white sailing sloop moored to it.

He stood looking out, his face, hollow-cheeked and tanned, turned toward the water.

His lips, firm and full, began to curve. The weight he hadn't realized was hanging from his heart began to lift.

At the sound of a rustle in the woods, he turned, enough of the wary boy still in the man to make the move swift and defensive. Out of the trees shot a black bullet.

"Witless!" His voice had both the ring of authority and easy humor. The combination had the dog skidding to a halt, all flopping ears and lolling tongue as it studied the man.

"Come on, it hasn't been that long." He crouched, held out a hand. "Remember me?"

Witless grinned the dopey grin that had named him, instantly flopped down and rolled to expose his belly for a rub. "There you go. That's the way."

There had always been a dog for this house. Always a boat at the dock, a rocker on the porch and a dog in the yard.

"Yeah, you remember me." As he stroked Witless, he looked over to the far end of the yard where Anna had planted a hydrangea over the grave of his own dog. The loyal and much-loved Foolish.

"I'm Seth," he murmured. "I've been away too long."

He caught the sound of an engine, the sassy squeal of tires from a turn taken just a hair faster than the law allowed. Even as he straightened, the dog leaped up, streaked away toward the front of the house.

Wanting to savor the moment, Seth followed more slowly. He listened to the car door slam, then to the lift and lilt of her voice as she spoke to the dog.

Then he just looked at her, Anna Spinelli Quinn, with the curling mass of dark hair windblown from the drive, her arms full of the bags she'd hefted out of the car.

His grin spread as she tried to ward off the desperate affection from the dog.

"How many times do we have to go over this one, simple rule?" she demanded. "You do not jump on people, especially me. Especially me when I'm wearing a suit."

"Great suit," Seth called out. "Better legs."

Her head whipped up, those deep brown eyes widened and showed him the shock, the pleasure, the welcome all in one glance.

"Oh my God!" Heedless of the contents, she tossed the bags through the open car door. And ran.

He caught her, lifted her six inches off the ground and spun

her around before setting her on her feet again. Still he didn't let go. Instead, he just buried his face in her hair.

"Hi."

"Seth. Seth." She clung, ignoring the dog that leaped and yipped and did his best to shove his muzzle between them. "I can't believe it. You're here."

"Don't cry."

"Just a little. I have to look at you." She had his face framed in her hands as she eased back. So handsome, she thought. So grown-up. "Look at all this," she murmured and brushed a hand at his hair.

"I meant to get some of it whacked off."

"I like it." Tears still trickled even as she grinned. "Very bohemian. You look wonderful. Absolutely wonderful."

"You're the most beautiful woman in the world."

"Oh boy." She sniffled, shook her head. "That's no way to get me to stop all this." She swiped at tears. "When did you get here? I thought you were in Rome."

"I was. I wanted to be here."

"If you'd called, we would've met you."

"I wanted to surprise you." He walked to the car to pull the bags out for her. "Cam at the boatyard?"

"Should be. Here, I'll get those. You need to get your things."

"I'll get them later. Where's Kevin and Jake?"

She started up the walk with him, glanced at her watch as she thought about her sons. "What day is this? My mind's still spinning."

"Thursday."

"Ah, Kevin has rehearsal, school play, and Jake's got softball practice. Kevin's got his driver's license, God help us, and is

scooping up his brother on his way home." She unlocked the front door. "They should be along in an hour, then peace will no longer lie across the land."

It was the same, Seth thought. It didn't matter what color the walls were painted or if the old sofa had been replaced, if a new lamp stood on the table. It was the same because it *felt* the same.

The dog snaked around his legs and made a beeline for the kitchen.

"I want you to sit down." She nodded to the kitchen table, under which Witless was sprawled, happily gnawing on a hunk of rope. "And tell me everything. You want some wine?"

"Sure, after I help you put this stuff away." When her eyebrows shot up, he paused with a gallon of milk in his hand. "What?"

"I was just remembering the way everyone, including you, disappeared whenever it was time to put groceries away."

"Because you always said we put things in the wrong place."

"You always did, on purpose so I'd kick you out of the kitchen."

"You copped to that, huh?"

"I cop to everything when it comes to my guys. Nothing gets by me, pal. Did something happen in Rome?"

"No." He continued to unpack the bags. He knew where everything went, where everything had always gone in Anna's kitchen. "I'm not in trouble, Anna."

But you are troubled, she thought, and let it go for now. "I'm going to open a nice Italian white. We'll have a glass and you can tell me all the wonderful things you've been doing. It seems like years since we've talked face-to-face."

He shut the refrigerator and turned to her. "I'm sorry I didn't get home for Christmas."

"Honey, we understood. You had a showing in January. We're all so proud of you, Seth. Cam must've bought a hundred copies of the issue of the *Smithsonian* magazine when they did the article on you. The young American artist who's seduced Europe."

He shrugged a shoulder, such an innately Quinn gesture, she grinned. "So sit," she ordered.

"I'll sit, but I'd rather you caught me up. How the hell is everyone? What're they doing? You first."

"All right." She finished opening the bottle, got out two glasses. "I'm doing more administrative work these days than casework. Social work involves a lot of paperwork, but it's not as satisfying. Between that and having two teenagers in the house, there's no time to be bored. The boat business is thriving."

She sat, passed Seth his glass. "Aubrey's working there."

"No kidding?" The thought of her, the girl who was more sister to him than any blood kin, made him smile. "How's she doing?"

"Terrific. She's beautiful, smart, stubborn and, according to Cam, a genius with wood. I think Grace was a little disappointed when Aubrey didn't want to pursue dancing, but it's hard to argue when you see your child so happy. And Grace and Ethan's Emily followed in her mother's toe shoes."

"She still heading to New York end of August?"

"A chance to dance with the American Ballet Company doesn't come along every day. She's grabbing it, and she swears she'll be principal before she's twenty. Deke's his father's son—quiet, clever and happiest when he's out on the water. Sweetie, do you want a snack?"

"No." He reached out, laid a hand over hers. "Keep going."

"Okay, then. Phillip remains the business's marketing and

promotion guru. I don't think any of us, including Phil, ever thought he'd leave the ad firm in Baltimore, give up urban living and dig down in Saint Chris. But it's been, what, fourteen years, so I don't suppose we can call it a whim. Of course he and Sybill keep the apartment in New York. She's working on a new book."

"Yeah, I talked to her." He rubbed the dog's head with his foot. "Something about the evolution of community in cyberspace. She's something. How are the kids?"

"Insane, as any self-respecting teenager should be. Bram was madly in love with a girl named Cloe last week. That could be over by now. Fiona's interests are torn between boys and shopping. But, well, she's fourteen, so that's natural."

"Fourteen. Jesus. She hadn't had her tenth birthday when I left for Europe. Even seeing them on and off over the last few years, it doesn't seem . . . it doesn't seem possible that Kevin's driving, and Aub's building boats. Bram's sniffing after girls. I remember—" He cut himself off, shook his head.

"What?"

"I remember when Grace was pregnant with Emily. It was the first time I was around someone who was having a baby—well, someone who wanted to. It seems like five minutes ago, and now Emily's going to New York. How can eighteen years go by, Anna, and you not look any older?"

"Oh, I've missed you." She laughed and squeezed his hand.

"I've missed you, too. All of you."

"We'll fix that. We'll round everybody up and have a big, noisy Quinn welcome-home on Sunday. How does that sound?"

"About as perfect as it gets."

The dog yipped, then scrambled out from under the table to run toward the front door.

"Cameron," Anna said. "Go on out and meet him."

He walked through the house, as he had so often. Opened the screen door, as he had so often. And looked at the man standing on the front lawn, playing tug-of-war with the dog over a hunk of rope.

He was still tall, still built like a sprinter. There were glints of silver in his hair now. He had the sleeves of his work shirt rolled up to the elbows, and his jeans were white at the stress points. He wore sunglasses and badly beaten Nikes.

At fifty, Cameron Quinn still looked like a badass.

In lieu of greeting, Seth let the screen door slam behind him. Cameron glanced over, and the only sign of surprise was his fingers sliding off the rope.

A thousand words passed between them without a sound. A million feelings, and countless memories. Saying nothing, Seth came down the steps as Cameron crossed the lawn. Then they stood, face-to-face.

"I hope that piece of shit in the driveway's a rental," Cameron began.

"Yeah, it is. Best I could do on short notice. Figured I'd turn it in tomorrow, then use the 'Vette for a while."

Cameron's smile was sharp as a blade. "In your dreams, pal. In your wildest dreams."

"No point in it sitting there going to waste."

"Less of one to let some half-assed painter with delusions of grandeur behind its classic wheel."

"Hey, you're the one who taught me to drive."

"Tried to. A ninety-year-old woman with a broken arm could handle a five-speed better than you." He jerked his head toward Seth's rental. "That embarrassment in my driveway doesn't inspire the confidence in me that you've improved in that area."

Smug now, Seth rocked back on his heels. "Test-drove a Maserati a couple of months ago."

Cam's eyebrows winged up. "Get out of here."

"Had her up to a hundred and ten. Scared the living shit out of me."

Cam laughed, gave Seth an affectionate punch on the arm. Then he sighed. "Son of a bitch. Son of a bitch," he said again as he dragged Seth into a fierce hug. "Why the hell didn't you let us know you were coming home?"

"It was sort of spur-of-the-moment," Seth began. "I wanted to be here. I just needed to be here."

"Okay. Anna burning up the phone lines letting everybody know we're serving fatted calf?"

"Probably. She said we'd have the calf on Sunday."

"That'll work. You settled in yet?"

"No. I got stuff in the car."

"Don't call that butt-ugly thing a car. Let's get your gear."

"Cam." Seth reached out, touched Cam's arm. "I want to come home. Not just for a few days or a couple weeks. I want to stay. Can I stay?"

Cam drew off his sunglasses, and his eyes, smoke-gray, met Seth's. "What the hell's the matter with you that you think you have to ask? You trying to piss me off?"

"I never had to try, nobody does with you. Anyway, I'll pull my weight."