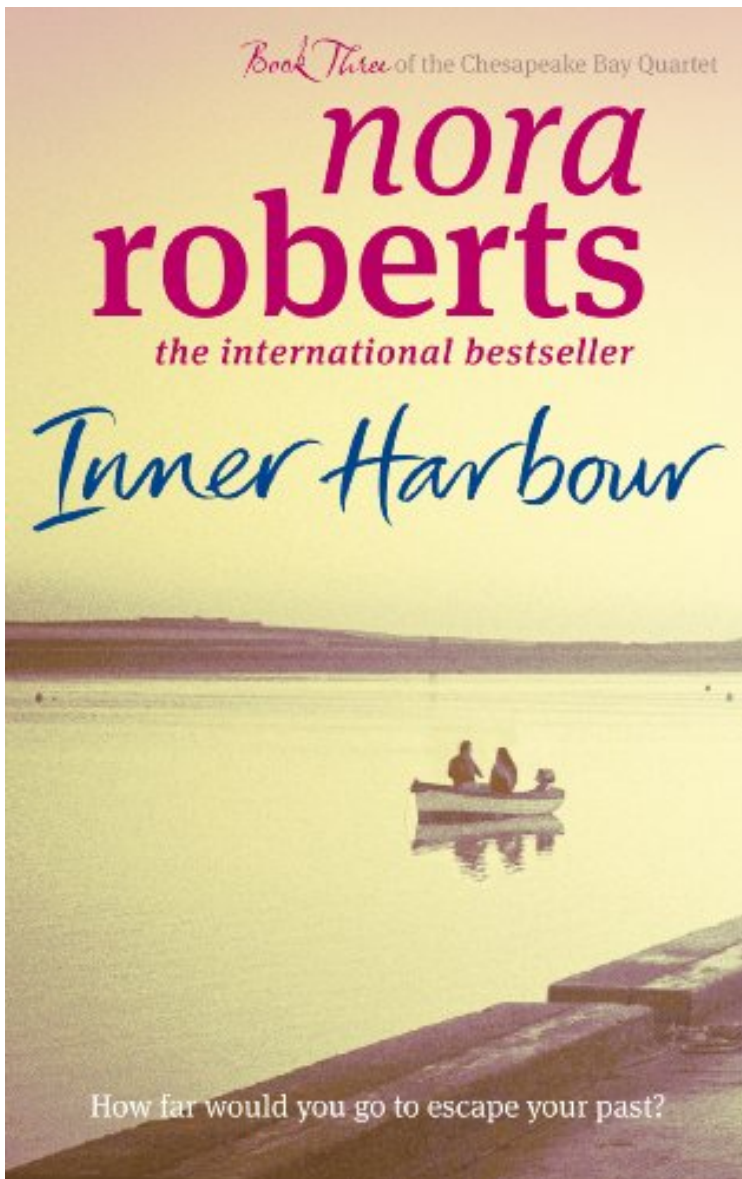


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Inner Harbour: Number 3 in series



Par Nora Roberts
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Description : Description du produitThird in the sweeping Chesapeake quartet. A stranger's cool reserve intrigues Phillip Quinn, but her secret could tear the family apart forever.

Prsentation de l'diteurA dangerous secret is coming to shore . . .Philip Quinn has done everything to make his life perfect. With his career on the fast track and a condo overlooking the Inner Harbour, his life on the streets is firmly in the past. But one look at his adopted brother Seth and the memories come flooding back.

In Seth he sees the boy he once was. Seth's future seems assured - until Dr Sybill Griffin shows up in the sleepy town of St Christopher's. She claims to be researching the town for her new book, but Philip is sure she is hiding something. While he is determined to uncover her motives, Sybill cannot deny her own

growing feelings for the intense and mysterious Quinn - but the secret she hides has the power to shatter the brothers' lives for evercomInner Harbor, the highly anticipated close to the story of "the lives and loves of three brothers on the windswept shores of the Chesapeake Bay" that began in Sea Swept and Rising Tides, finds Philip, the last unwed Quinn brother, juggling his high-powered advertising job and his newfound family duty of helping to care for his young adopted brother, Seth. When Dr. Sybill Griffin shows up in the sleepy town of St. Christopher, Philip makes room in his hectic schedule for the mysterious woman who stirs his senses and threatens to steal his heart. And while Sybill can't deny her own growing feelings for the charismatic Quinn, the secret connection to Seth that she hides may destroy any chance that the two young lovers have at happiness. Full of heartwarming familial moments, tender romance, and a touch of tension, Inner Harbor is an outstanding conclusion to a truly stunning trilogy.

Chapter One Phillip loosened the windsor knot in his Fendi tie. It was a long commute from Baltimore to Maryland's Eastern Shore, and he'd programmed his CD player with that in mind. He started out mellow with a little Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. Thursday-evening traffic was as bad as predicted, made worse by the sluggish rain and the rubberneckers who couldn't resist a long, fascinated goggle at the three-car accident on the Baltimore Beltway. By the time he was heading south on Route 50, even the hot licks of vintage Stones couldn't completely lift his mood. He'd brought work with him and somehow had to eke out time for the Myerstone Tire account over the weekend. They wanted a whole new look for this advertising campaign. Happy tires make happy drivers, Phillip thought, drumming his fingers on the wheel to the rhythm of Keith Richards's outlaw guitar. Which was a crock, he decided. Nobody was happy driving in rainy rush-hour traffic, no matter what rubber covered their wheels. But he'd come up with something that would make the consumers think that riding on Myerstones would make them happy, safe, and sexy. It was his job, and he was good at it. Good enough to juggle four major accounts, supervise the status of six lesser ones, and never appear to break a sweat within the slick corridors of Innovations, the well-heeled advertising firm where he worked. The firm that demanded style, exuberance, and creativity from its executives. They didn't pay to see him sweat. Alone, however, was a different matter. He knew he'd been burning not a candle but a torch at both ends for months. With one hard slap of fate he'd gone from living for Phillip Quinn to wondering what had happened to his cheerfully upwardly mobile urban lifestyle. His father's death six months before had turned his life upside down. The life that Ray and Stella Quinn had righted seventeen years ago. They'd walked into that dreary hospital room and offered him a chance and a choice. He'd taken the chance because he'd been smart enough to understand that he had no choice. Going back on the streets wasn't as appealing as it had been before his chest had been ripped open by bullets. Living with his mother was no longer an option, not even if she changed her mind and let him buy his way back into the cramped apartment on Baltimore's Block. Social Services was taking a hard look at the situation, and he knew he'd be dumped into the system the minute he was back on his feet. He had no intention of going back into the system, or back with his mother, or back to the gutter, for that matter. He'd already decided that. He felt that all he needed was a little time to work out a plan. At the moment that time was buffered by some very fine drugs that he hadn't had to buy or steal. But he didn't figure that little benefit was going to last forever. With the Demerol sliding through his system, he gave the Quinns a canny once-over and dismissed them as a couple of weirdo do-gooders. That was fine with him. They wanted to be Samaritans, give him a place to hang out until he was back to a hundred percent, good for them. Good for him. They told him they had a house on the Eastern Shore, which for an inner-city kid was the other end of the world. But he figured a change of scene couldn't hurt. They had two sons about his age. Phillip decided he wouldn't have to worry about a couple of wimps that the do-gooders had raised. They told him they had rules, and education was a priority. School didn't bother him any. He breezed his way through when he decided to go. No drugs. Stella said that in a cool voice that made Phillip reevaluate her as he put on his most angelic expression and said a polite No, ma'am. He had no doubt that when he wanted a hit, he'd be able to find a source, even in some bumfuck town on the Bay. Then Stella leaned over the bed, her eyes shrewd, her mouth smiling thinly. You have a face that belongs on a Renaissance painting. But that doesn't make you less of a thief, a hoodlum, and a liar. We'll help you if you want to be helped. But don't treat us like imbeciles. And Ray laughed his big, booming laugh. He squeezed Stella's shoulder and Phillip's at the same time. It would be, Phillip remembered he'd said, a rare treat to watch the two of them butt heads for the next little while. They came back several times over the next two weeks. Phillip talked with them and with the social worker, who'd been much easier to con than the Quinns. In the end they took him home from the hospital, to the pretty white house by the water. He met their sons, assessed the situation. When he learned that the other boys, Cameron and Ethan, had been

taken in much as he had been, he was certain they were all lunatics. He figured on biding his time. For a doctor and a college professor they hadn't collected an abundance of easily stolen or fenced, valuables. But he scoped out what there was. Instead of stealing from them, he fell in love with them. He took their name and spent the next ten years in the house by the water. Then Stella had died, and part of his world dropped away. She had become the mother he'd never believed existed. Steady, strong, loving, and shrewd. He grieved for her, that first true loss of his life. He buried part of that grief in work, pushing his way through college, toward a goal of success and a sheen of sophistication and an entry-level position at Innovations. He didn't intend to remain on the bottom rung for long. Taking the position at Innovations in Baltimore was a small personal triumph. He was going back to the city of his misery, but he was going back as a man of taste. No one seeing the man in the tailored suit would suspect that he'd once been a petty thief, a sometime drug dealer, and an occasional prostitute. Everything he'd gained over the last seventeen years could be traced back to that moment when Ray and Stella Quinn had walked into his hospital room. Then Ray had died suddenly, leaving shadows that had yet to be washed with the light. The man Phillip had loved as completely as a son could love a father had lost his life on a quiet stretch of road in the middle of the day when his car had met a telephone pole at high speed. There was another hospital room. This time it was the Mighty Quinn lying broken in the bed with machines gasping. Phillip, along with his brothers, had made a promise to watch out for and to keep the last of Ray Quinn's strays, another lost boy. But this boy had secrets, and he looked at you, with Ray's eyes. The talk around the waterfront and the neighborhoods of the little town of St. Christopher's on Maryland's Eastern Shore hinted of adultery, of suicide, of scandal. In the six months since the whispers had started, Phillip felt that he and his brothers had gotten no closer to finding the truth. Who was Seth DeLauter and what had he been to Raymond Quinn? Another stray? Another half-grown boy drowning in a vicious sea of neglect and violence who so desperately needed a lifeline? Or was he more? A Quinn by blood as well as by circumstance? All Phillip could be sure of was that ten-year-old Seth was his brother as much as Cam and Ethan were his brothers. Each of them had been snatched out of a nightmare and given a chance to change their lives. With Seth, Ray and Stella weren't there to keep that choice open. There was a part of Phillip, a part that had lived inside a young, careless thief, that resented even the possibility that Seth could be Ray's son by blood, a son conceived in adultery and abandoned in shame. It would be a betrayal of everything the Quinns had taught him, everything they had shown him by living their lives as they had. He detested himself for considering it, for knowing that now and then he studied Seth with cool, appraising eyes and wondered if the boy's existence was the reason Ray Quinn was dead. Whenever that nasty thought crept into his mind, Phillip shifted his concentration to Gloria DeLauter. Seth's mother was the woman who had accused Professor Raymond Quinn of sexual harassment. She claimed it had happened years before, while she was a student at the university. But there was no record of her ever attending classes there. The same woman had sold her ten-year-old son to Ray as if he'd been a package of meat. The same woman, Phillip was certain, that Ray had been to Baltimore to see before he had driven home and driven himself to his death. She'd taken off. Women like Gloria were skilled in skipping out of harm's way. Weeks ago, she'd sent the Quinns a not-so-subtle blackmail letter: If you want to keep the kid, I need more. Phillip's jaw clenched when he remembered the naked fear on Seth's face when he'd learned of it. She wasn't going to get her hands on the boy, he told himself. She was going to discover that the Quinn brothers were a tougher mark than one softhearted old man. Not just the Quinn brothers now, either, he thought as he turned off onto the rural county road that would lead him home. He thought of family as he drove fast down a road flanked by fields of soybeans, of peas, of corn grown taller than a man. Now that Cam and Ethan were married, Seth had two determined women to stand with him as well. Married. Phillip shook his head in amused wonder. Who would have thought it? Cam had hitched himself to the sexy social worker, and Ethan was married to sweet-eyed Grace. And had become an instant father, Phillip mused, to angel-faced Aubrey. Well, good for them. In fact, he had to admit that Anna Spinelli and Grace Monroe were tailor-made for his brothers. It would only add to their strength as a family when it came time for the hearing on permanent guardianship of Seth. And marriage certainly appeared to suit them. Even if the word itself gave him the willies. For himself, Phillip much preferred the single life and all its benefits. Not that he'd had much time to avail himself of all those benefits in the past few months. Weekends in St. Chris, supervising homework assignments, pounding a hull together for the fledgling Boats by Quinn, dealing with the books for the new business, hauling groceries all of which had somehow become his domain cramped a man's style. He'd promised his father on his deathbed that he would take care of Seth. With his brothers he'd made a pact to move back to the Shore, to share the guardianship and the responsibilities. For Phillip that

pact meant splitting his time between Baltimore and St. Chris, and his energies between maintaining his career and his income and tending to a new and often problematic brother and a new business. It was all a risk. Raising a ten-year-old wasn't without headaches and fumbling mistakes under the best of circumstances, he imagined. Seth DeLauter, raised by a part-time hooker, full-time junkie, and amateur extortionist, had hardly come through the best of circumstances. Getting a boatbuilding enterprise off the ground was a series of irksome details and backbreaking labor. Yet somehow it was working, and if he discounted the ridiculous demands on his time and energy, it was working fairly well. Not so long ago his weekends had been spent in the company of any number of attractive, interesting women, having dinner at some new hot spot, an evening at the theater or a concert, and if the chemistry was right, a quiet Sunday brunch in bed. He'd get back to that, Phillip promised himself. Once all the details were in place, he would have his life back again. But, as his father would have said, for the next little while ... He turned into the drive. The rain had stopped, leaving a light sheen of wet on the leaves and grass. Twilight was creeping in.

He could see the light in the living room window glowing in a soft and steady welcome. Some of the summer flowers that Anna had babied along were hanging on, and early fall blooms shimmered in the shadows. He could hear the puppy barking, though at nine months Foolish had grown too big and sleek to be considered a puppy anymore. It was Anna's night to cook, he remembered. Thank God. It meant a real meal would be served at the Quinns'. He rolled his shoulders, thought about pouring himself a glass of wine, then watched Foolish dash around the side of the house in pursuit of a mangy yellow tennis ball. The sight of Phillip getting out of his car obviously distracted the dog from the game. He skidded to a halt and set up a din of wild, terrified barking. "Idiot." But he grinned as he pulled his briefcase out of the Jeep. At the familiar voice, the barking turned into mad joy. Foolish bounded up with a delighted look in his eyes and wet, muddy paws. "No jumping!" Phillip yelled, using his briefcase like a shield. "I mean it. Sit!" Foolish quivered, but dropped his rump on the ground and lifted a paw. His tongue lolled, his eyes gleamed. "That's a good dog." Gingerly Phillip shook the filthy paw and scratched the dog's silky ears. "Hey." Seth wandered into the front yard. His jeans were grubby from wrestling with the dog, his baseball cap was askew so that straw-straight blond hair spiked out of it. The smile, Phillip noted, came much more quickly and easily than it had a few months before. But there was a gap in it. "Hey." Phillip butted a finger on the bill of the cap. "Lose something?" "Huh?" Phillip tapped a finger against his own straight, white teeth. "Oh, yeah." With a typical Quinn shrug, Seth grinned, pushing his tongue into the gap. His face was fuller than it had been six months before, and his eyes less wary. "It was loose. Had to give it a yank a couple of days ago. Bled like a son of a bitch." Phillip didn't bother to sigh over Seth's language. Some things, he determined, weren't going to be his problem. "So, did the Tooth Fairy bring you anything?" "Get real." "Hey, if you didn't squeeze a buck out of Cam, you're no brother of mine." "I got two bucks out of it. One from Cam and one from Ethan."

Laughing, Phillip swung an arm over Seth's shoulders and headed toward the house. "Well, you're not getting one out of me, pal. I'm on to you. How was the first full week of school?" "Boring." Though it hadn't been, Seth admitted silently. It had been exciting. All the new junk Anna had taken him shopping for. Sharp pencils, blank notebooks, pens full of ink. He'd refused the X-Files lunch box she'd wanted to get him. Only a dork carried a lunch box in middle school. But it had been really cool and tough to sneer at. He had cool clothes and bitching sneakers. And best of all, for the first time in his life, he was in the same place, the same school, with the same people he'd left behind in June. "Homework?" Phillip asked, raising his eyebrows as he opened the front door. Seth rolled his eyes. "Man, don't you ever think about anything else?" "Kid, I live for homework. Especially when it's yours." Foolish burst through the door ahead of Phillip, nearly knocking him down with enthusiasm. "You've still got some work to do on that dog." But the mild annoyance faded instantly. He could smell Anna's red sauce simmering, like ambrosia on the air. "God bless us, every one,"

he murmured. "Manicotti," Seth informed him. "Yeah? I've got a Chianti I've been saving just for this moment." He tossed his briefcase aside. "We'll hit the books after dinner." He found his sister-in-law in the kitchen, filling pasta tubes with cheese. The sleeves of the crisp white shirt she'd worn to the office were rolled up, and a white butcher's apron covered her navy skirt. She'd taken off her heels and tapped a bare foot to the beat of the aria she was humming. Carmen, Phillip recognized. Her wonderful mass of curling black hair was still pinned up. With a wink at Seth, Phillip came up behind her, caught her around the waist, and pressed a noisy kiss onto the top of her head. "Run away with me. We'll change our names. You can be Sophia and I'll be Carlo. Let me take you to paradise where you can cook for me and me alone. None of these peasants appreciate you like I do." "Let me just finish this tube, Carlo, and I'll go pack." She turned her head, her dark Italian eyes laughing. "Dinner in thirty minutes." "I'll open the wine." "Don't we have

anything to eat now?" Seth wanted to know. "There's antipasto in the fridge," she told him. "Go ahead and get it out." "It's just vegetables and junk," Seth complained when he pulled out the platter. "Yep." "Jeez." "Wash the dog off your hands before you start on that." "Dog spit's cleaner than people spit," Seth informed her. "I read how if you get bit by another guy it's worse than getting bit by a dog." "I'm thrilled to have that fascinating tidbit of information. Wash the dog spit off your hands anyway." "Man." Disgusted, Seth clomped out, with Foolish slinking after him. Phillip chose the wine from the small supply he kept in the pantry. Fine wines were one of his passions, and his palate was extremely discriminating. His apartment in Baltimore boasted an extensive and carefully chosen selection, which he kept in a closet he'd remodeled specifically for that purpose. At the Shore, his beloved bottles of Bordeaux and Burgundy kept company with Rice Krispies and boxes of Jell-O Instant Pudding. He'd learned to live with it. "So how was your week?" he asked Anna. "Busy. Whoever said women can have everything should be shot, Handling a career and a family is grueling." Then she looked up with a brilliant smile. "I'm loving it." "It shows." He drew the cork expertly, sniffed it and approved, then set the bottle on the counter to breathe. "Where's Cam?" "Should be on his way home from the boatyard. He and Ethan wanted to put in an extra hour. The first Boat by Quinn is finished. The owner's coming in tomorrow. It's finished, Phillip." Her smile flashed, brilliant and glowing with pride. "At dock, seaworthy and just gorgeous." He felt a little tug of disappointment that he hadn't been in on the last day. "We should be having champagne." Anna lifted a brow as she studied the label on the wine. "A bottle of Folonari, Ruffino?" He considered one of Anna's finest traits to be her appreciation for good wine. "Seventy-five," he said with a broad grin. "You won't hear any complaints from me. Congratulations, Mr. Quinn, on your first boat." "It's not my deal. I just handle the details and pass for slave labor." "Of course it's your deal. Details are necessary, and neither Cam nor Ethan could handle them with the finesse you do." "I think the word they use, is `nagging.'" "They need to be nagged. You should be proud of what the three of you have accomplished in the last few months. Not just the new business, but the family. Each one of you has given up something that's important to you for Seth. And each one of you has gotten something important back." "I never expected the kid to matter so much." While Anna smothered the filled tubes with sauce, Phillip opened a cupboard for wineglasses. "I still have moments when the whole thing pisses me off." "That's only natural, Phillip." "Doesn't make me feel any better about it." He shrugged his shoulders in dismissal, then poured two glasses. "But most of the time, I look at him and think he's a pretty good deal for a kid brother." Anna grated cheese over the casserole. Out of the corner of her eye she watched Phillip lift his glass, appreciate the bouquet. He was beautiful to look at, she mused. Physically, he was as close to male perfection as she could imagine. Bronze hair, thick and full, eyes more gold than brown. His face was long, narrow, thoughtful. Both sensual and angelic. His tall, trim build seemed to have been fashioned for Italian suits. But since she'd seen him stripped to the waist in faded Levi's she knew there was nothing soft about him. Sophisticated, tough, erudite, shrewd. An interesting man, she mused. She slipped the casserole into the oven, then turned to pick up her wine. Smiling at him, she tapped her glass on his. "You're a pretty good deal too, Phillip, for a big brother." She leaned in to kiss him lightly as Cam walked in. "Get your mouth off my wife." Phillip merely smiled and slid an arm around Anna's waist. "She put hers on me. She likes me." "She likes me better." To prove it, Cam hooked a hand in the tie of Anna's apron, spun her around, and pulled her into his arms to kiss her brainless. He grinned, nipped her bottom lip and patted her butt companionably. "Don'cha, sugar?" Her head was still spinning. "Probably." She blew out a breath. "All things considered." But she wiggled free. "You're filthy." "Just came in to grab a beer to take into the shower." Long and lean, dark and dangerous, he prowled over to the fridge. "And kiss my wife," he added with a smug look at Phillip. "Go get your own woman." "Who has time?" Phillip said mournfully. * * * After dinner, and an hour spent slaving over long division, battles of the Revolutionary War, and sixth-grade vocabulary, Phillip settled down in his room with his laptop and his files. It was the same room he'd been given when Ray and Stella Quinn had brought him home. The walls had been a pale green then. Sometime during his sixteenth year he'd gotten a wild hair and painted them magenta. God knew why. He remembered that his mother for Stella had become his mother by then had taken one look and warned him he'd have terminal indigestion. He thought it was sexy. For about three months. Then he'd gone with a stark white for a while, accented with moody black-framed, black-and-white, photographs. Always looking for ambience, Phillip thought now, amused at himself. He'd circled back to that soft green right before he moved to Baltimore. They'd been right all along, he supposed. His parents had usually been right. They'd given him this room, in this house, in this place. He hadn't made it easy for them. The first three months were a battle of wills. He smuggled in drugs, picked fights, stole liquor, and stumbled in drunk at dawn. It was clear to

him now that he'd been testing them, daring them to kick him out, Toss him back. Go ahead, he'd thought. You can't handle me. But they did. They had not only handled him, they had made him. I wonder, Phillip, his father had said, why you want to waste a good mind and a good body. Why you want to let the bastards win. Phillip, who was suffering from the raw gut and bursting head of a drag and alcohol hangover, didn't give a good damn. Ray took him out on the boat, telling him that a good sail would clear his head. Sick as a dog, Phillip leaned over the rail, throwing up the remnants of the poisons he'd pumped into his system the night before. He'd just turned fourteen. Ray anchored the boat in a narrow gut. He held Phillip's head, wiped his face, then offered him a cold can of ginger ale. "Sit down." He didn't so much sit as collapse. His hands shook, his stomach shuddered at the first sip from the can. Ray sat across from him, his big hands on his knees, his silvering hair flowing in the light breeze. And those eyes, those brilliant blue eyes, level and considering. "You've had a couple of months now to get your bearings around here. Stella says you've come around physically. You're strong, and healthy enough though you aren't going to stay that way if you keep this up." He pursed his lips, said nothing for a long moment. There was a heron in the tall grass, still as a painting. The air was bright and chill with late fall, the trees bare of leaves so that the hard blue sky spread overhead. Wind ruffled the grass and skimmed fingers over the water. The man sat, apparently content with the silence and the scene. The boy slouched, pale of face and hard of eye. "We can play this a lot of ways, Phil," Ray said at length. "We can be hard-asses. We can put you on a short leash, watch you every minute and bust your balls every time you screw up. Which is most of the time." Considering, Ray picked up a fishing rod, absently baited it with a marshmallow. "Or we could all just say that this little experiment's a bust and you can go back into the system." Phillip's stomach churned, making him swallow to hold down what he didn't quite recognize as fear. "I don't need you. I don't need anybody." "Yeah, you do." Ray said it mildly as he dropped the line into the water. Ripples spread, endlessly. "You go back into the system, you'll stay there. Couple of years down the road, it won't be juvie anymore. You'll end up in a cell with the bad guys, the kind of guys who are going to take a real liking to that pretty face of yours. Some seven-foot con with hands like smoked hams is going to grab you in the showers one fine day and make you his bride." Phillip yearned desperately for a cigarette. The image conjured by Ray's word made fresh sweat pop out on his forehead. "I can take care of myself." "Son, they'll pass you around like canaps, and you know it. You talk a good game and you fight a good fight, but some things are inevitable. Up to this point your life has pretty much sucked. You're not responsible for that. But you are responsible for What happens from here on." He fell into silence again, clamping the pole between his knees before reaching for a cold can of Pepsi.

Taking his time, Ray popped the top, tipped the can back, and guzzled. "Stella and I thought we saw something in you," he continued. "We still do," he added, looking at Phillip again. "But until you do, we're not going to get anywhere." "What do you care?" Phillip tossed back miserably. "Hard to say at the moment.

Maybe you're not worth it. Maybe you'll just end up back on the streets hustling marks and turning tricks anyway." For three months he'd had a decent bed, regular meals, and all the books he could read of his secret loves at his disposal. At the thought of losing it his throat filled again, but he only shrugged. "I'll get by." "If all you want to do is get by, that's your choice. Here you can have a home, a family. You can have a life and make something out of it. Or you can go on the way you are." Ray reached over to Phillip quickly, and the boy braced himself for the blow, clenched his fists to return it. But Ray only pulled Phillip's shirt up to expose the livid scars on his chest. "You can go back to that," he said quietly. Phillip looked into Ray's eyes. He saw compassion and hope. And he saw himself mirrored back, bleeding in a dirty gutter on a street where life was worth less than a dime bag. Sick, tired, terrified, Phillip dropped his head into his hands.

"What's the point?" "You're the point, son." Ray ran his hand over Phillip's hair. "You're the point." Things hadn't changed overnight, Phillip thought now. But they had begun to change. His parents had made him believe in himself, despite himself. It had become a point of pride for him to do well in school, to learn, to remake himself into Phillip Quinn. He figured he'd done a good job of it. He'd coated that street kid with a sheen of class. He had a slick career, a well-appointed condo with a killer view of the Inner Harbor, and a wardrobe that suited both. It seemed that he'd come full circle, spending his weekends back in this room with its green walls and sturdy furniture, with its windows that overlooked the trees and the marsh. But this time,

Seth was the point. Reprinted from Inner Harbor by Nora Roberts by permission of Berkley, a member of Penguin Putnam Inc. Copyright 1998, Nora Roberts. All rights reserved. This excerpt, or any parts thereof,

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