

sanctuary

nora
roberts



PIATKUS

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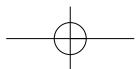
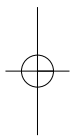
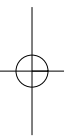
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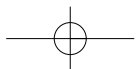
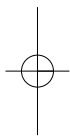
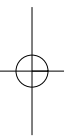
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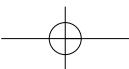
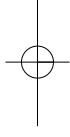
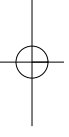




PART ONE

*When weather-beaten I come back . . .
My body a sack of bones; broken within . . .*

—John Donne



ONE

SHE dreamed of Sanctuary. The great house gleamed bride-white in the moonlight, as majestic a force breasting the slope that reigned over eastern dunes and western marsh as a queen upon her throne. The house stood as it had for more than a century, a grand tribute to man's vanity and brilliance, near the dark shadows of the forest of live oaks, where the river flowed in murky silence.

Within the shelter of trees, fireflies blinked gold, and night creatures stirred, braced to hunt or be hunted. Wild things bred there in shadows, in secret.

There were no lights to brighten the tall, narrow windows of Sanctuary. No lights to spread welcome over its graceful porches, its grand doors. Night was deep, and the breath of it moist from the sea. The only sound to disturb it was of wind rustling through the leaves of the great oaks and the dry clicking—like bony fingers—of the palm fronds. The white columns stood like soldiers guarding the wide veranda, but no one opened the enormous front door to greet her.

As she walked closer, she could hear the crunch of sand and shells on the road under her feet. Wind chimes tinkled, little notes of song. The porch swing creaked on its chain, but no one lazed upon it to enjoy the moon and the night.



The smell of jasmine and musk roses played on the air, underscored by the salty scent of the sea. She began to hear that too, the low and steady thunder of water spilling over sand and sucking back into its own heart.

The beat of it, that steady and patient pulse, reminded all who inhabited the island of Lost Desire that the sea could reclaim the land and all on it at its whim.

Still, her mood lifted at the sound of it, the music of home and childhood. Once she had run as free and wild through that forest as a deer, had scouted its marshes, raced along its sandy beaches with the careless privilege of youth.

Now, no longer a child, she was home again.

She walked quickly, hurrying up the steps, across the veranda, closing her hand over the big brass handle that glinted like a lost treasure.

The door was locked.

She twisted it right, then left, shoved against the thick mahogany panel. *Let me in*, she thought as her heart began to thud in her chest. *I've come home. I've come back.*

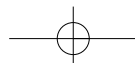
But the door remained shut and locked. When she pressed her face against the glass of the tall windows flanking it, she could see nothing but darkness within.

And was afraid.

She ran now, around the side of the house, over the terrace, where flowers streamed out of pots and lilies danced in chorus lines of bright color. The music of the wind chimes became harsh and discordant, the fluttering of fronds was a hiss of warning. She struggled with the next door, weeping as she beat her fists against it.

Please, please, don't shut me out. I want to come home.

She sobbed as she stumbled down the garden path. She would go to the back, in through the screened porch. It was never locked—Mama said a kitchen should always be open to company.





But she couldn't find it. The trees sprang up, thick and close, the branches and draping moss barred her way.

She was lost, tripping over roots in her confusion, fighting to see through the dark as the canopy of trees closed out the moon. The wind rose up and howled and slapped at her in flat-handed, punishing blows. Spears of saw palms struck out like swords. She turned, but where the path had been was now the river, cutting her off from Sanctuary. The high grass along its slippery banks waved madly.

It was then she saw herself, standing alone and weeping on the other bank.

It was then she knew she was dead.

JO fought her way out of the dream, all but felt the sharp edges of it scraping her skin as she dragged herself to the surface of the tunnel of sleep. Her lungs burned, and her face was wet with sweat and tears. With a trembling hand, she fumbled for the bedside lamp, knocking both a book and an overfilled ashtray to the floor in her hurry to break out of the dark.

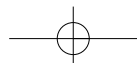
When the light shot on, she drew her knees up close to her chest, wrapped her arms around them, and rocked herself calm.

It was just a dream, she told herself. Just a bad dream.

She was home, in her own bed, in her apartment and miles from the island where Sanctuary stood. A grown woman of twenty-seven had no business being spooked by a silly dream.

But she was still shaking when she reached for a cigarette. It took her three tries to manage to light a match.

Three-fifteen, she noted by the clock on the nightstand. That was becoming typical. There was nothing worse than the three A.M. jitters. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and bent down to pick up the overturned ashtray. She told herself she'd clean up the mess in the morning. She sat there, her oversized T-shirt bunched over her thighs, and ordered herself to get a grip.





She didn't know why her dreams were taking her back to the island of Lost Desire and the home she'd escaped from at eighteen. But Jo figured any first-year psych student could translate the rest of the symbolism. The house was locked because she doubted anyone would welcome her if she did return home. Just lately, she'd given some thought to it but had wondered if she'd lost the way back.

And she was nearing the age her mother had been when she had left the island. Disappeared, abandoning her husband and three children without a second glance.

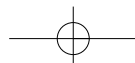
Had Annabelle ever dreamed of coming home, Jo wondered, and dreamed the door was locked to her?

She didn't want to think about that, didn't want to remember the woman who had broken her heart twenty years before. Jo reminded herself that she should be long over such things by now. She'd lived without her mother, and without Sanctuary and her family. She had even thrived—at least professionally.

Tapping her cigarette absently, Jo glanced around the bedroom. She kept it simple, practical. Though she'd traveled widely, there were few mementos. Except the photographs. She'd matted and framed the black-and-white prints, choosing the ones among her work that she found the most restful to decorate the walls of the room where she slept.

There, an empty park bench, the black wrought iron all fluid curves. And there, a single willow, its lacy leaves dipping low over a small, glassy pool. A moonlit garden was a study in shadow and texture and contrasting shapes. The lonely beach with the sun just breaking the horizon tempted the viewer to step inside the photo and feel the sand rough underfoot.

She'd hung that seascape only the week before, after returning from an assignment on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Perhaps that was one reason she'd begun to think about home, Jo decided. She'd been very close. She could have traveled a bit south down to Georgia and ferried from the mainland to the island.





There were no roads to Desire, no bridges spanning its sound. But she hadn't gone south. She'd completed her assignment and come back to Charlotte to bury herself in her work.

And her nightmares.

She crushed out the cigarette and stood. There would be no more sleep, she knew, so she pulled on a pair of sweatpants. She would do some darkroom work, take her mind off things.

It was probably the book deal that was making her nervous, she decided, as she padded out of the bedroom. It was a huge step in her career. Though she knew her work was good, the offer from a major publishing house to create an art book from a collection of her photographs had been unexpected and thrilling.

Natural Studies, by Jo Ellen Hathaway, she thought as she turned into the small galley kitchen to make coffee. No, that sounded like a science project. *Glimpses of Life?* Pompous.

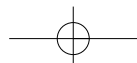
She smiled a little, pushing back her smoky red hair and yawning. She should just take the pictures and leave the title selection to the experts.

She knew when to step back and when to take a stand, after all. She'd been doing one or the other most of her life. Maybe she would send a copy of the book home. What would her family think of it? Would it end up gracing one of the coffee tables where an overnight guest could page through it and wonder if Jo Ellen Hathaway was related to the Hathaways who ran the Inn at Sanctuary?

Would her father even open it at all and see what she had learned to do? Or would he simply shrug, leave it untouched, and go out to walk his island? Annabelle's island.

It was doubtful he would take an interest in his oldest daughter now. And it was foolish for that daughter to care.

Jo shrugged the thought away, took a plain blue mug from a hook. While she waited for the coffee to brew, she leaned on the counter and looked out her tiny window.





There were some advantages to being up and awake at three in the morning, she decided. The phone wouldn't ring. No one would call or fax or expect anything of her. For a few hours she didn't have to be anyone, or do anything. If her stomach was jittery and her head ached, no one knew the weakness but herself.

Below her kitchen window, the streets were dark and empty, slicked by late-winter rain. A streetlamp spread a small pool of light—lonely light, Jo thought. There was no one to bask in it. Aloneness had such mystery, she mused. Such endless possibilities.

It pulled at her, as such scenes often did, and she found herself leaving the scent of coffee, grabbing her Nikon, and rushing out barefoot into the chilly night to photograph the deserted street.

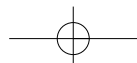
It soothed her as nothing else could. With a camera in her hand and an image in her mind, she could forget everything else. Her long feet splashed through chilly puddles as she experimented with angles. With absent annoyance she flicked at her hair. It wouldn't be falling in her face if she'd had it trimmed. But she'd had no time, so it swung heavily forward in a tousled wave and made her wish for an elastic band.

She took nearly a dozen shots before she was satisfied. When she turned, her gaze was drawn upward. She'd left the lights on, she mused. She hadn't even been aware she'd turned on so many on the trip from bedroom to kitchen.

Lips pursed, she crossed the street and focused her camera again. Calculating, she crouched, shot at an upward angle, and captured those lighted windows in the dark building. *Den of the Insomniac*, she decided. Then with a half laugh that echoed eerily enough to make her shudder, she lowered the camera again.

God, maybe she was losing her mind. Would a sane woman be out at three in the morning, half dressed and shivering, while she took pictures of her own windows?

She pressed her fingers against her eyes and wished more than anything else for the single thing that had always seemed to elude her. Normality.





You needed sleep to be normal, she thought. She hadn't had a full night's sleep in more than a month. You needed regular meals. She'd lost ten pounds in the last few weeks and had watched her long, rangy frame go bony. You needed peace of mind. She couldn't remember if she had ever laid claim to that. Friends? Certainly she had friends, but no one close enough to call in the middle of the night to console her.

Family. Well, she had family, of sorts. A brother and sister whose lives no longer marched with hers. A father who was almost a stranger. A mother she hadn't seen or heard from in twenty years.

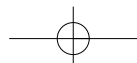
Not my fault, Jo reminded herself as she started back across the street. It was Annabelle's fault. Everything had changed when Annabelle had run from Sanctuary and left her baffled family crushed and heartbroken. The trouble, as Jo saw it, was that the rest of them hadn't gotten over it. She had.

She hadn't stayed on the island guarding every grain of sand like her father did. She hadn't dedicated her life to running and caring for Sanctuary like her brother, Brian. And she hadn't escaped into foolish fantasies or the next thrill the way her sister, Lexy, had.

Instead she had studied, and she had worked, and she had made a life for herself. If she was a little shaky just now, it was only because she'd overextended, was letting the pressure get to her. She was a little run-down, that was all. She'd just add some vitamins to her regimen and get back in shape.

She might even take a vacation, Jo mused as she dug her keys out of her pocket. It had been three years—no, four—since she had last taken a trip without a specific assignment. Maybe Mexico, the West Indies. Someplace where the pace was slow and the sun hot. Slowing down and clearing her mind. That was the way to get past this little blip in her life.

As she stepped back into the apartment, she kicked a small, square manila envelope that lay on the floor. For a moment she



simply stood, one hand on the door, the other holding her camera, and stared at it.

Had it been there when she left? Why was it there in the first place? The first one had come a month before, had been waiting in her stack of mail, with only her name carefully printed across it.

Her hands began to shake again as she ordered herself to close the door, to lock it. Her breath hitched, but she leaned over, picked it up. Carefully, she set the camera aside, then unsealed the flap.

When she tapped out the contents, the sound she made was a long, low moan. The photograph was very professionally done, perfectly cropped. Just as the other three had been. A woman's eyes, heavy-lidded, almond-shaped, with thick lashes and delicately arched brows. Jo knew their color would be blue, deep blue, because the eyes were her own. In them was stark terror.

When was it taken? How and why? She pressed a hand to her mouth, staring down at the photo, knowing her eyes mirrored the shot perfectly. Terror swept through her, had her rushing through the apartment into the small second bedroom she'd converted to a darkroom. Frantically she yanked open a drawer, pawed through the contents, and found the envelopes she'd buried there. In each was another black-and-white photo, cropped to two by six inches.

Her heartbeat was thundering in her ears as she lined them up. In the first the eyes were closed, as if she'd been photographed while sleeping. The others followed the waking process. Lashes barely lifted, showing only a hint of iris. In the third the eyes were open but unfocused and clouded with confusion.

They had disturbed her, yes, unsettled her, certainly, when she found them tucked in her mail. But they hadn't frightened her.

Now the last shot, centered on her eyes, fully awake and bright with fear.



Stepping back, shivering, Jo struggled to be calm. Why only the eyes? she asked herself. How had someone gotten close enough to take these pictures without her being aware of it? Now, whoever it was had been as close as the other side of her front door.

Propelled by fresh panic, she ran into the living room, and frantically checked the locks. Her heart was battering against her ribs when she fell back against the door. Then the anger kicked in.

Bastard, she thought. He wanted her to be terrorized. He wanted her to hide inside those rooms, jumping at shadows, afraid to step outside for fear he'd be there watching. She who had always been fearless was playing right into his hands.

She had wandered alone through foreign cities, walked mean streets and empty ones, she'd climbed mountains and hacked through jungles. With the camera as her shield, she'd never given a thought to fear. And now, because of a handful of photos, her legs were jellied with it.

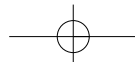
The fear had been building, she admitted now. Growing and spiking over the weeks, level by level. It made her feel helpless, so exposed, so brutally alone.

Jo pushed herself away from the door. She couldn't and wouldn't live this way. She would ignore it, put it aside. Bury it deep. God knew she was an expert at burying traumas, small and large. This was just one more.

She was going to drink her coffee and go to work.

BY eight she had come full circle—sliding through fatigue, arcing through nervous energy, creative calm, then back to fatigue.

She couldn't work mechanically, not even on the most basic aspect of darkroom chores. She insisted on giving every step her full attention. To do so, she'd had to calm down, ditch both the anger and the fear. Over her first cup of coffee, she'd convinced herself she had figured out the reasoning behind the photos





she'd been receiving. Someone admired her work and was trying to get her attention, engage her influence for their own.

That made sense.

Occasionally she lectured or gave workshops. In addition, she'd had three major shows in the last three years. It wasn't that difficult or that extraordinary for someone to have taken her picture—several pictures, for that matter.

That was certainly reasonable.

Whoever it was had gotten creative, that was all. They'd enlarged the eye area, cropped it, and were sending the photos to her in a kind of series. Though the photos appeared to have been printed recently, there was no telling when or where they'd been taken. The negatives might be a year old. Or two. Or five.

They had certainly gotten her attention, but she'd overreacted, taken it too personally.

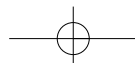
Over the last couple of years, she had received samples of work from admirers of hers. Usually there was a letter attached, praising her own photographs before the sender went into a pitch about wanting her advice or her help, or in a few cases, suggesting that they collaborate on a project.

The success she was enjoying professionally was still relatively new. She wasn't yet used to the pressures that went along with commercial success, or the expectations, which could become burdensome.

And, Jo admitted as she ignored her unsteady stomach and sipped coffee that had gone stone cold, she wasn't handling that success as well as she might.

She would handle it better, she thought, rolling her aching head on her aching shoulders, if everyone would just leave her alone to do what she did best.

Completed prints hung drying on the wet side of her dark-room. Her last batch of negatives had been developed and, sitting on a stool at her work counter, she slid a contact sheet onto her light board, then studied it, frame by frame, through her loupe.



For a moment she felt a flash of panic and despair. Every print she looked at was out of focus, blurry. Goddamn it, goddamn it, how could that be? Was it the whole roll? She shifted, blinked, and watched the magnified image of rising dunes and oat grass pop clear.

With a sound somewhere between a grunt and a laugh she sat back, rolled her tensed shoulders. "It's not the prints that are blurry and out of focus, you idiot," she muttered aloud. "It's you."

She set the loupe aside and closed her eyes to rest them. She lacked the energy to get up and make more coffee. She knew she should go eat, get something solid into her system. And she knew she should sleep. Stretch out on the bed, close everything off and crash.

But she was afraid to. In sleep she would lose even this shaky control.

She was beginning to think she should see a doctor, get something for her nerves before they frayed beyond repair. But that idea made her think of psychiatrists. Undoubtedly they would want to poke and pry inside her brain and dig up matters she was determined to forget.

She would handle it. She was good at handling herself. Or, as Brian had always said, she was good at elbowing everyone out of her way so she could handle everything herself.

What choice had she had—had any of them had when they'd been left alone to flounder on that damned spit of land miles from nowhere?

The rage that erupted inside her jolted her, it was so sudden, so powerful. She trembled with it, clenched her fists in her lap, and had to bite back the hot words she wanted to spit out at the brother who wasn't even there.

Tired, she told herself. She was just tired, that was all. She needed to put work aside, take one of those over-the-counter sleeping aids she'd bought and had yet to try, turn off the phone and get some sleep. She would be steadier then, stronger.

When a hand fell on her shoulder, she ripped off a scream and sent her coffee mug flying.

“Jesus! Jesus, Jo!” Bobby Banes scrambled back, scattering the mail he carried on the floor.

“What are you doing? What the hell are you doing?” She bolted off the stool and sent it crashing, as he gaped at her.

“I—you said you wanted to get started at eight. I’m only a few minutes late.”

Jo fought for breath, gripped the edge of her worktable to keep herself upright. “Eight?”

Her student assistant nodded cautiously. He swallowed hard and kept his distance. To his eye she still looked wild and ready to attack. It was his second semester working with her, and he thought he’d learned how to anticipate her orders, gauge her moods, and avoid her temper. But he didn’t have a clue how to handle that hot fear in her eyes.

“Why the hell didn’t you knock?” she snapped at him.

“I did. When you didn’t answer, I figured you must be in here, so I used the key you gave me when you went on the last assignment.”

“Give it back. Now.”

“Sure. Okay, Jo.” Keeping his eyes on hers, he dug into the front pocket of his fashionably faded jeans. “I didn’t mean to spook you.”

Jo bit down on control and took the key he held out. There was as much embarrassment now, she realized, as fear. To give herself a moment, she bent down and righted her stool. “Sorry, Bobby. You did spook me. I didn’t hear you knock.”

“It’s okay. Want me to get you another cup of coffee?”

She shook her head and gave in to her knocking knees. As she slid onto the stool, she worked up a smile for him. He was a good student, she thought—a little pompous about his work yet, but he was only twenty-one.

She thought he was going for the artist-as-college-student

look, with his dark blond hair in a shoulder-length ponytail, the single gold hoop earring accenting his long, narrow face. His teeth were perfect. His parents had believed in braces, she thought, running her tongue over her own slight overbite.

He had a good eye, she mused. And a great deal of potential. That was why he was here, after all. Jo was always willing to pay back what had been given to her.

Because his big brown eyes were still watching her warily, she put more effort into the smile. "I had a rough night."

"You look like it." He tried a smile of his own when she lifted a brow. "The art is in seeing what's really there, right? And you look whipped. Couldn't sleep, huh?"

Vain was one thing Jo wasn't. She shrugged her shoulders and rubbed her tired eyes. "Not much."

"You ought to try that melatonin. My mother swears by it." He crouched to pick up the broken shards of the mug. "And maybe you could cut back on the coffee."

He glanced up but saw she wasn't listening. She'd gone on a side trip again, Bobby thought. A new habit of hers. He'd just about given up on getting his mentor into a healthier lifestyle. But he decided to give it one more shot.

"You've been living on coffee and cigarettes again."

"Yeah." She was drifting, half asleep where she sat.

"That stuff'll kill you. And you need an exercise program. You've dropped about ten pounds in the last few weeks. With your height you need to carry more weight. And you've got small bones—you're courting osteoporosis. Gotta build up those bones and muscles."

"Uh-huh."

"You ought to see a doctor. You ask me, you're anemic. You got no color, and you could pack half your equipment in the bags under your eyes."

"So nice of you to notice."

He scooped up the biggest shards, dumped them in her waste

can. Of course he'd noticed. She had a face that drew attention. It didn't matter that she seemed to work overtime to fade into the background. He'd never seen her wear makeup, and she kept her hair pulled back, but anyone with an eye could see it should be framing that oval face with its delicate bones and exotic eyes and sexy mouth.

Bobby caught himself, felt heat rise to his cheeks. She would laugh at him if she knew he'd had a little crush on her when she first took him on. That, he figured, had been as much professional admiration as physical attraction. And he'd gotten over the attraction part. Mostly.

But there was no doubt that if she would do the minimum to enhance that magnolia skin, dab some color on that top-heavy mouth and smudge up those long-lidded eyes, she'd be a knock-out.

"I could fix you breakfast," he began. "If you've got something besides candy bars and moldy bread."

Taking a long breath, Jo tuned in. "No, that's okay. Maybe we'll stop somewhere and grab something. I'm already running behind."

She slid off the stool and crouched to pick up the mail.

"You know, it wouldn't hurt you to take a few days off, focus on yourself. My mom goes to this spa down in Miami."

His words were only a buzzing in her ear now. She picked up the manila envelope with her name printed neatly on it in block letters. She had to wipe a film of sweat from her brow. In the pit of her stomach was a sick ball that went beyond dread into fear.

The envelope was thicker than the others had been, weightier. *Throw it away*, her mind screamed out. *Don't open it. Don't look inside.*

But her fingers were already scraping along the flap. Low whimpering sounds escaped her as she tore at the little metal clasp. This time an avalanche of photos spilled out onto the floor.



She snatched one up. It was a well-produced five-by-seven black-and-white.

Not just her eyes this time, but all of her. She recognized the background—a park near her building where she often walked. Another was of her in downtown Charlotte, standing on a curb with her camera bag over her shoulder.

“Hey, that’s a pretty good shot of you.”

As Bobby leaned down to select one of the prints, she slapped at his hand and snarled at him, “Keep away. Keep back. Don’t touch me.”

“Jo, I . . .”

“Stay the hell away from me.” Panting, she dropped on all fours to paw frantically through the prints. There was picture after picture of her doing ordinary, everyday things. Coming out of the market with a bag of groceries, getting in or out of her car.

He’s everywhere, he’s watching me. Wherever I go, whatever I do. He’s hunting me, she thought, as her teeth began to chatter. He’s hunting me and there’s nothing I can do. Nothing, until . . .

Then everything inside her clicked off. The photograph in her hand shook as if a brisk breeze had kicked up inside the room. She couldn’t scream. There seemed to be no air inside her.

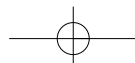
She simply couldn’t feel her body any longer.

The photograph was brilliantly produced, the lighting and use of shadows and textures masterful. She was naked, her skin glowing eerily. Her body was arranged in a restful pose, the fragile chin dipped down, the head gently angled. One arm draped across her midriff, the other was flung up over her head in a position of dreaming sleep.

But the eyes were open and staring. A doll’s eyes. Dead eyes.

For a moment, she was thrown helplessly back into her nightmare, staring at herself and unable to fight her way out of the dark.

But even through terror she could see the differences. The



woman in the photo had a waving mass of hair that fanned out from her face. And the face was softer, the body riper than her own.

“Mama?” she whispered and gripped the picture with both hands. “Mama?”

“What is it, Jo?” Shaken, Bobby listened to his own voice hitch and dip as he stared into Jo’s glazed eyes. “What the hell is it?”

“Where are her clothes?” Jo tilted her head, began to rock herself. Her head was full of sounds, rushing, thundering sounds. “Where is she?”

“Take it easy.” Bobby took a step forward, started to reach down to take the photo from her.

Her head snapped up. “Stay away.” The color flashed back into her cheeks, riding high. Something not quite sane danced in her eyes. “Don’t touch me. Don’t touch her.”

Frightened, baffled, he straightened again, held both hands palms out. “Okay. Okay, Jo.”

“I don’t want you to touch her.” She was cold, so cold. She looked down at the photo again. It was Annabelle. Young, eerily beautiful, and cold as death. “She shouldn’t have left us. She shouldn’t have gone away. Why did she go?”

“Maybe she had to,” Bobby said quietly.

“No, she belonged with us. We needed her, but she didn’t want us. She’s so pretty.” Tears rolled down Jo’s cheeks, and the picture trembled in her hand. “She’s so beautiful. Like a fairy princess. I used to think she was a princess. She left us. She left us and went away. Now she’s dead.”

Her vision wavered, her skin went hot. Pressing the photo against her breasts, Jo curled into a ball and wept.

“Come on, Jo.” Gently, Bobby reached down. “Come on with me now. We’ll get some help.”

“I’m so tired,” she murmured, letting him pick her up as if she were a child. “I want to go home.”



“Okay. Just close your eyes now.”
The photo fluttered silently to the floor, facedown atop all the other faces. She saw writing on the back. Large bold letters.

DEATH OF AN ANGEL

Her last thought, as the dark closed in, was Sanctuary.

