

THREE

Jo stood at the window in the bedroom of her childhood. The view was the same. Pretty gardens patiently waiting to be weeded and fed. Mounds of alyssum were already golden and bluebells were waving. Violas were sunning their sassy little faces, guarded by the tall spears of purple iris and cheerful yellow tulips. Impatiens and dianthus bloomed reliably.

There were the palms, cabbage and saw, and beyond them the shady oaks where lacy ferns and indifferent wildflowers thrived.

The light was so lovely, gilded and pearly as the clouds drifted, casting soft shadows. The image was one of peace, solitude, and storybook perfection. If she'd had the energy, she'd have gone out now, captured it on film and made it her own.

She'd missed it. How odd, she thought, to realize only now that she'd missed the view from the window of the room where she'd spent nearly every night of the first eighteen years of her life.

She'd whiled away many hours gardening with her mother, learning the names of the flowers, their needs and habits, enjoying the feel of soil under her fingers and the sun on her back. Birds and butterflies, the tinkle of wind chimes, the drift of puffy clouds overhead in a soft blue sky were treasured memories from her early childhood.

Apparently she'd forgotten to hold on to them, Jo decided, as



she turned wearily from the window. Any pictures she'd taken of the scene, with her mind or with her camera, had been tucked away for a very long time.

Her room had changed little as well. The family wing in Sanctuary still glowed with Annabelle's style and taste. For her older daughter she'd chosen a gleaming brass half-tester bed with a lacy canopy and a complex and fluid design of cornices and knobs. The spread was antique Irish lace, a Pendleton heirloom that Jo had always loved because of its pattern and texture. And because it seemed so sturdy and ageless.

On the wallpaper, bluebells bloomed in cheerful riot over the ivory background, and the trim was honey-toned and warm.

Annabelle had selected the antiques—the globe lamps and maple tables, the dainty chairs and vases that had always held fresh flowers. She'd wanted her children to learn early to live with the precious and care for it. On the mantel over the little marble fireplace were candles and seashells. On the shelves on the opposite wall were books rather than dolls.

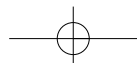
Even as a child, Jo had had little use for dolls.

Annabelle was dead. No matter how much of her stubbornly remained in this room, in this house, on this island, she was dead. Sometime in the last twenty years she had died, made her desertion complete and irrevocable.

Dear God, why had someone immortalized that death on film? Jo wondered, as she buried her face in her hands. And why had they sent that immortalization to Annabelle's daughter?

DEATH OF AN ANGEL

Those words had been printed on the back of the photograph. Jo remembered them vividly. Now she rubbed the heel of her hand hard between her breasts to try to calm her heart. What kind of sickness was that? she asked herself. What kind of threat? And how much of it was aimed at herself?





It had been there, it had been real. It didn't matter that when she got out of the hospital and returned to her apartment, the print was gone. She couldn't let it matter. If she admitted she'd imagined it, that she'd been hallucinating, she would have to admit that she'd lost her mind.

How could she face that?

But the print hadn't been there when she returned. All the others were, all those everyday images of herself, still scattered on the darkroom floor where she'd dropped them in shock and panic.

But though she searched, spent hours going over every inch of the apartment, she didn't find the print that had broken her.

If it had never been there . . . Closing her eyes, she rested her forehead on the window glass. If she'd fabricated it, if she'd somehow wanted that terrible image to be fact, for her mother to be exposed that way, and dead—what did that make her?

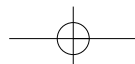
Which could she accept? Her own mental instability, or her mother's death?

Don't think about it now. She pressed a hand to her mouth as her breath began to catch in her throat. Put it away, just like you put the photographs away. Lock it up until you're stronger. Don't break down again, Jo Ellen, she ordered herself. You'll end up back in the hospital, with doctors poking into both body and mind.

Handle it. She drew a deep, steadying breath. Handle it until you can ask whatever questions have to be asked, find whatever answers there are to be found.

She would do something practical, she decided, something ordinary, attempt the pretense, at least, of a normal visit home.

She'd already lowered the front of the slant-top desk and set one of her cameras on it. But as she stared at it she realized that was as much unpacking as she could handle. Jo looked at the suitcases lying on the lovely bedspread. The thought of opening them, of taking clothes out and hanging them in the armoire,





folding them into drawers was simply overwhelming. Instead she sat down in a chair and closed her eyes.

What she needed to do was think and plan. She worked best with a list of goals and tasks, recorded in the order that would be the most practical and efficient. Coming home had been the only solution, so it was practical and efficient. It was, she promised herself, the first step. She just had to clear her mind, somehow—clear it and latch on to the next step.

But she drifted, nearly dreaming.

It seemed like only seconds had passed when someone knocked, but Jo found herself jerked awake and disoriented. She sprang to her feet, feeling ridiculously embarrassed to have nearly been caught napping in the middle of the day. Before she could reach the door, it opened and Cousin Kate poked her head in.

“Well, there you are. Goodness, Jo, you look like three days of death. Sit down and drink this tea and tell me what’s going on with you.”

It was so Kate, Jo thought, that frank, no-nonsense, bossy attitude. She found herself smiling as she watched Kate march in with the tea tray. “You look wonderful.”

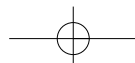
“I take care of myself.” Kate set the tray on the low table in the sitting area and waved one hand at a chair. “Which, from the looks of you, you haven’t been doing. You’re too thin, too pale, and your hair’s a disaster of major proportions. But we’ll fix that.”

Briskly she poured tea from a porcelain teapot decked with sprigs of ivy into two matching cups. “Now, then.” She sat back, sipped, then angled her head.

“I’m taking some time off,” Jo told her. She’d driven down from Charlotte for the express purpose of giving herself time to rehearse her reasons and excuses for coming home. “A few weeks.”

“Jo Ellen, you can’t snow me.”

They’d never been able to, Jo thought, not any of them, not





from the moment Kate had set foot in Sanctuary. She'd come days after Annabelle's desertion to spend a week and was still there twenty years later.

They'd needed her, God knew, Jo thought, as she tried to calculate just how little she could get away with telling Katherine Pendleton. She sipped her tea, stalling.

Kate was Annabelle's cousin, and the family resemblance was marked in the eyes, the coloring, the physical build. But where Annabelle, in Jo's memory, had always seemed soft and innately feminine, Kate was sharp-angled and precise.

Yes, Kate did take care of herself, Jo agreed. She wore her hair boyishly short, a russet cap that suited her fox-at-alert face and practical style. Her wardrobe leaned toward the casual but never the sloppy. Jeans were always pressed, cotton shirts crisp. Her nails were neat and short and never without three coats of clear polish. Though she was fifty, she kept herself trim and from the back could have been mistaken for a teenage boy.

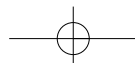
She had come into their lives at their lowest ebb and had never faltered. Had simply been there, managing details, pushing each of them to do whatever needed to be done next, and, in her no-nonsense way, bullying and loving them into at least an illusion of normality.

"I've missed you, Kate," Jo murmured. "I really have."

Kate stared at her a moment, and something flickered over her face. "You won't soften me up, Jo Ellen. You're in trouble, and you can choose to tell me or you can make me pry it out of you. Either way, I'll have it."

"I needed some time off."

That, Kate mused, was undoubtedly true; she could tell just from the looks of the girl. Knowing Jo, she doubted very much if it was a man who'd put that wounded look in her eyes. So that left work. Work that took Jo to strange and faraway places, Kate thought. Often dangerous places of war and disaster. Work that





she knew her young cousin had deliberately put ahead of a life and a family.

Little girl, Kate thought, *my poor, sweet little girl. What have you done to yourself?*

Kate tightened her fingers on the handle of her cup to keep them from trembling. “Were you hurt?”

“No. No,” Jo repeated and set her tea down to press her fingers to her aching eyes. “Just overwork, stress. I guess I overextended myself in the last couple of months. The pressure, that’s all.”

The photographs. Mama.

Kate drew her brows together. The line that formed between them was known, not so affectionately, as the Pendleton Fault Line. “What kind of pressure eats the weight off of you, Jo Ellen, and makes your hands shake?”

Defensively, Jo clasped those unsteady hands together in her lap. “I guess you could say I haven’t been taking care of myself.” Jo smiled a little. “I’m going to do better.”

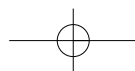
Tapping her fingers on the arm of the chair, Kate studied Jo’s face. The trouble there went too deep to be only professional concerns. “Have you been sick?”

“No.” The lie slid off her tongue nearly as smoothly as planned. Very deliberately she blocked out the thought of a hospital room, almost certain that Kate would be able to see it in her mind. “Just a little run-down. I haven’t been sleeping well lately.” Edgy under Kate’s steady gaze, Jo rose to dig cigarettes out of the pocket of the jacket she’d tossed over a chair. “I’ve got that book deal—I wrote you about it. I guess it’s got me stressed out.” She flicked on her lighter. “It’s new territory for me.”

“You should be proud of yourself, not making yourself sick over it.”

“You’re right. Absolutely.” Jo blew out smoke and fought back the image of Annabelle, the photographs. “I’m taking some time off.”

It wasn’t all, Kate calculated, but it was enough for now. “It’s



good you've come home. A couple of weeks of Brian's cooking will put some meat on you again. And God knows we could use some help around here. Most of the rooms, and the cottages, are booked straight through the summer."

"So business is good?" Jo asked without much interest.

"People need to get away from their own routines and pick up someone else's. Most that come here are looking for quiet and solitude or they'd be in Hilton Head or on Jekyll. Still, they want clean linen and fresh towels."

Kate tapped her fingers, thinking briefly of the work stretched out before her that afternoon. "Lexy's been lending a hand," she continued, "but she's no more dependable than she ever was. Just as likely to run off for the day as to do what chores need doing. She's dealing with some disappointments herself, and some growing-up pains."

"Lex is twenty-four, Kate. She should be grown up by now."

"Some take longer than others. It's not a fault, it's a fact."

Kate rose, always ready to defend one of her chicks, even if it was against the pecks of another.

"And some never learn to face reality," Jo put in. "And spend their lives blaming everyone else for their failures and disappointments."

"Alexa is not a failure. You were never patient enough with her—any more than she was with you. That's a fact as well."

"I never asked her to be patient with me." Old resentments surfaced like hot grease on tainted water. "I never asked her, or any of them, for anything."

"No, you never asked, Jo," Kate said evenly. "You might have to give something back if you ask. You might have to admit you need them if you let them need you. Well, it's time you all faced up to a few things. It's been two years since the three of you have been in this house together."

"I know how long it's been," Jo said bitterly. "And I didn't get any more of a welcome from Brian and Lexy than I'd expected."



“Maybe you’d have gotten more if you’d expected more.” Kate set her jaw. “You haven’t even asked about your father.”

Annoyed, Jo stabbed out her cigarette. “What would you like me to ask?”

“Don’t take that snippy tone with me, young lady. If you’re going to be under this roof, you’ll show some respect for those who provide it. And you’ll do your part while you’re here. Your brother’s had too much of the running of this place on his shoulders these last few years. It’s time the family pitched in. It’s time you were a family.”

“I’m not an innkeeper, Kate, and I can’t imagine that Brian wants me poking my fingers into his business.”

“You don’t have to be an innkeeper to do laundry or polish furniture or sweep the sand off the veranda.”

At the ice in her tone, Jo responded in defense and defiance. “I didn’t say I wouldn’t do my part, I just meant—”

“I know exactly what you meant, and I’m telling you, young lady, I’m sick to death of that kind of attitude. Every one of you children would rather sink over your heads in the marsh than ask one of your siblings for a helping hand. And you’d strangle on your tongue before you asked your daddy. I don’t know whether you’re competing or just being ornery, but I want you to put it aside while you’re here. This is home. By God, it’s time it felt like one.”

“Kate,” Jo began as Kate headed for the door.

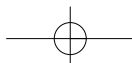
“No, I’m too mad to talk to you now.”

“I only meant . . .” When the door shut smartly, Jo let the air out of her lungs on a long sigh.

Her head was achy, her stomach knotted, and guilt was smothering her like a soaked blanket.

Kate was wrong, she decided. It felt exactly like home.

FROM the fringes of the marsh, Sam Hathaway watched a hawk soar over its hunting ground. Sam had hiked over to the landward



side of the island that morning, leaving the house just before dawn. He knew Brian had gone out at nearly the same hour, but they hadn't spoken. Each had his own way, and his own route.

Sometimes Sam took a Jeep, but more often he walked. Some days he would head to the dunes and watch the sun rise over the water, turning it bloody red, then golden, then blue. When the beach was all space and light and brilliance, he might walk for miles, his eyes keenly judging erosion, looking for any fresh buildup of sand.

He left shells where the water had tossed them.

He rarely ventured onto the interdune meadows. They were fragile, and every footfall caused damage and change. Sam fought bitterly against change.

There were days he preferred to wander to the edge of the forest, behind the dunes, where the lakes and sloughs were full of life and music. There were mornings he needed the stillness and dim light there rather than the thunder of waves and the rising sun. He could, like the patient heron waiting for a careless fish, stand motionless as minutes ticked by.

There were times among the ponds and stands of willow and thick film of duckweed that he could forget that any world existed beyond this, his own. Here, the alligator hidden in the reeds while it digested its last meal and the turtle sunning on the log, likely to become gator bait itself, were more real to him than people.

But it was a rare, rare thing for Sam to go beyond the ponds and into the shadows of the forest. Annabelle had loved the forest best.

Other days he was drawn here, to the marsh and its mysteries. Here was a cycle he could understand—growth and decay, life and death. This was nature and could be accepted. No man caused this or—as long as Sam was in control—would interfere with it.

At the edges he could watch the fiddler crabs scurrying, so



busy in the mud that they made quiet popping sounds, like soap-suds. Sam knew that when he left, raccoons and other predators would creep along the mud, scrape out those busy crabs, and feast.

That was all part of the cycle.

Now, as spring came brilliantly into its own, the waving cord-grass was turning from tawny gold to green and the turf was beginning to bloom with the colors of sea lavender and oxeye. He had seen more than thirty springs come to Desire, and he never tired of it.

The land had been his wife's, passed through her family from generation to generation. But it had become his the moment he'd set foot on it. Just as Annabelle had become his the moment he'd set eyes on her.

He hadn't kept the woman, but through her desertion he had kept the land.

Sam was a fatalist—or had become one. There was no avoiding destiny.

The land had come to him from Annabelle, and he tended it carefully, protected it fiercely, and left it never.

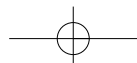
Though it had been years since he'd turned in the night reaching out for the ghost of his wife, he could find her anywhere and everywhere he looked on Desire.

It was both his pain and his comfort.

Sam could see the exposed roots of trees where the river was eating away at the fringe of the marsh. Some said it was best to take steps to protect those fringes. But Sam believed that nature found its way. If man, whether with good intent or ill, set his own hand to changing that river's course, what repercussions would it have in other areas?

No, he would leave it be and let the land and the sea, the wind and the rain fight it out.

From a few feet away, Kate studied him. He was a tall, wiry man with skin tanned and ruddy and dark hair silvering. His





firm mouth was slow to smile, and slower yet were those changeable hazel eyes. Lines fanned out from those eyes, deeply scored and, in that oddity of masculinity, only enhancing his face.

He had large hands and feet, both of which he'd passed on to his son. Yet Kate knew Sam could move with an uncanny and soundless grace that no city dweller could ever master.

In twenty years he had never welcomed her nor expected her to leave. She had simply come and stayed and fulfilled a purpose. In weak moments, Kate allowed herself to wonder what he would think or do or say if she simply packed up and left.

But she didn't leave, doubted she ever would.

She'd been in love with Sam Hathaway nearly every moment of those twenty years.

Kate squared her shoulders, set her chin. Though she suspected he already knew she was there, she knew he wouldn't speak to her unless she spoke first.

"Jo Ellen came in on the morning ferry."

Sam continued to watch the hawk circle. Yes, he'd known Kate was there, just as he'd known she had some reason she thought important that would have brought her to the marsh. Kate wasn't one for mud and gators.

"Why?" was all he said, and extracted an impatient sigh from Kate.

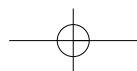
"It's her home, isn't it?"

His voice was slow, as if the words were formed reluctantly. "Don't figure she thinks of it that way. Hasn't for a long time."

"Whatever she thinks, it *is* her home. You're her father and you'll want to welcome her back."

He got a picture of his older daughter in his mind. And saw his wife with a clarity that brought both despair and outrage. But only disinterest showed in his voice. "I'll be up to the house later on."

"It's been nearly two years since she's been home, Sam. For Lord's sake, go see your daughter."





He shifted, annoyed and uncomfortable. Kate had a way of drawing out those reactions in him. “There’s time, unless she’s planning on taking the ferry back to the mainland this afternoon. Never could stay in one place for long, as I recall. And she couldn’t wait to get shed of Desire.”

“Going off to college and making a career and a life for herself isn’t desertion.”

Though he didn’t move or make a sound, Kate knew the shaft had hit home, and was sorry she’d felt it necessary to hurl it. “She’s back now, Sam. I don’t think she’s up to going anywhere for a while, and that’s not the point.”

Kate marched up, took a firm hold on his arm, and turned him to face her. There were times you had to shove an obvious point in Sam’s face to make him see it, she thought. And that was just what she intended to do now.

“She’s hurting. She doesn’t look well, Sam. She’s lost weight and she’s pale as a sheet. She says she hasn’t been ill, but she’s lying. She looks like you could knock her down with a hard thought.”

For the first time a shadow of worry moved into his eyes. “Did she get hurt on her job?”

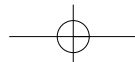
There, finally, Kate thought, but was careful not to show the satisfaction. “It’s not that kind of hurt,” she said more gently. “It’s an inside hurt. I can’t put my finger on it, but it’s there. She needs her home, her family. She needs her father.”

“If Jo’s got a problem, she’ll deal with it. She always has.”

“You mean she’s always had to,” Kate tossed back. She wanted to shake him until she’d loosened the lock he had snapped on his heart. “Damn it, Sam, be there for her.”

He looked beyond Kate, to the marshes. “She’s past the point where she needs me to bandage up her bumps and scratches.”

“No, she’s not.” Kate dropped her hand from his arm. “She’s still your daughter. She always will be. Belle wasn’t the only one who went away, Sam.” She watched his face close in as she said it





and shook her head fiercely. “Brian and Jo and Lexy lost her, too. But they shouldn’t have had to lose you.”

His chest had tightened, and he turned away to stare out over the marsh, knowing that the pressure inside him would ease again if he was left alone. “I said I’d be up to the house later on. Jo Ellen has something to say to me, she can say it then.”

“One of these days you’re going to realize you’ve got something to say to her, to all of them.”

She left him alone, hoping he would realize it soon.

