



Home Fires

Luanne Rice

*HOME
FIRES*



Luanne Rice

BANTAM BOOKS

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FOR THE QUIGLEYS

Don, Muffin, Colleen, Tom
and especially Derek
with love and thanks

Chapter 1



The fire started in the tangled old wires behind the bathroom heater. At first there was no flame, only a core of intense heat. The wires' frayed insulation, gray weave with the texture of a man's jacket, began to smolder. One spark popped, then another. The orange line crackled to the panel board, causing a momentary blink of the house's microwave, stereo, television, and alarm clocks.

In that instant the portable phone beside Anne Davis's bed clicked, resetting itself. Usually the sound would awaken her, but tonight it barely penetrated her deep sleep. She had been traveling a long day; it had been months since she had slept well. She half turned toward the bedside table, but she was engulfed in a sweet dream that would not release her.

Tendrils of blue smoke wisped through the wallboards three rooms away. They dissipated like ghosts into the thin winter air. Flames licked the wall from behind, trying to follow the smoke. They raced in all directions, searching for cracks. One line of fire spawned another, and another, all crazy to escape. They filled the space like agitated spectators in an arena crammed beyond its capacity. They sped down the wires, and that was all it took. When the electrical system exploded, the flames burst through the wall in one thunderous blast. The house was on fire.

It was another Karen dream that enveloped Anne as she slept. A dream of hazy images, clear bliss. Karen in her arms. At the beach, with Matt nearby. The sun's heat sensual and intense. Anne's nose pressed against Karen's skin, the spot where her neck and shoulder met, smelling of summer. Baby sweat, Coppertone SPF 40, salt water, chocolate from a Good Humor bar. Karen's weight on Anne's lap, and the sound of waves lapping the shore.

A clack. Sounds from the outside world.

Anne shifted, her face burrowing into the pillow, anything to preserve the dream. The family on summer vacation. Matt, Karen, and Anne together on a beach blanket. The hot summer day: she had it back, that feeling of joy and closeness. It was perfect, and so very real. She could touch Matt's leg

lick salt grains from the nape of Karen's neck. All her senses were awake; contentment throbbed through her body like lifeblood.

Then the house exploded.

Anne jumped out of bed. For a second she didn't know where she was. She started for Karen's bedroom, just yards away, then realized she wasn't in their New York apartment. She had come to the island, to her family home, the place where she'd grown up.

Smoke drifted in from the hall, under the closed bedroom door. Shivering in the dark, Anne touched the door with her hand. It felt scorching hot. Grabbing a bureau scarf, she wrapped it around the brass knob and pushed. Fire roared inward, burning her hand as she slammed the door.

She ran to the window and saw the snow glistening orange a long drop below. Her room was on the second floor, and the land sloped steeply away. In the distance, coming from town, she heard a siren. She returned to the door and touched the knob, as if to check that it hadn't somehow, incredibly, cooled down. Then, with no other choice, she turned back to the window.

“Karen,” she said, choking with smoke and panic. There was no time to tie bedsheets together, no time to wait for the Island Volunteer Fire Department. She opened the window and looked down. The height, even this twenty-foot height, terrified her. She gulped air, but the smoke was catching up with her. She could jump out the window, she thought, then reenter the house by the porch door.

Climbing over the sill in her white nightgown, she let herself hang against the side of the house. It took forever to summon the power it took to let go. Don't think about it, she told herself. You have to do this. Jump. Jump. Finally her fingers obeyed. With bare feet she kicked off. Her eyes were closed. She tried to forget she was falling. A snow-capped yew bush broke her landing, and she rolled a few yards down the hill before she could stop herself.

Flames had broken through the bathroom roof, and the west upstairs windows glowed. Sirens screamed down Salt Whistle Road. Before Anne reached the porch, she heard men shouting, spoons creaking as the hoses were unwound. Suddenly her mind was clear, and a superhuman burst of will propelled her across the yard, across the porch floor.

“Stop! Don't go in there,” someone called. Anne glanced over her shoulder at the fire truck and saw a big man running toward her. He towered over everyone: a giant in black rubber coat, *Star Wars* mask, and yellow fireman's hat.

Anne rattled the door. Locked. She let out a cry of panic and frustration. From a nest of dried brown leaves she grabbed a smooth rock painted with the dark spars of a sailing ship by Anne herself at age seven, and used by the family ever since as a doorstop. Smashing it through a pane of glass, she reached inside to find the dead bolt.

“Please, no!” the man shouted, running closer. Anne's hand shaking, she glanced back again. He had flipped the mask up, and Anne was shocked to see that his left cheek was melted, like wax on a candlestick. His eyes had battle in them—urgency and alarm.

If he wanted to stop her, he was Anne's enemy. Moaning with panic, she groped for the dead bolt. Finding it, she gave it a turn. And then she was inside.

THOMAS X. Devlin of the Island Volunteer Fire Department stood outside the old house on Sand Whistle Road, watching black smoke seep through the attic vents. Flames lit the west windows on the second floor. He felt a shiver go down his spine, the way it always did at a fire ground. His skin graft felt stiff, and he flexed his hands a few times, getting ready to work.

Car and truckloads of volunteers were streaming around the marsh, sounding a cacophony of air horns and sirens, a parade of pulsating blue strobe lights. Martin Cole lined up the cherry picker and Thomas Devlin was reaching for the roof saw when he spied the woman.

With her black hair and white nightgown, she was nearly invisible against the snow and night sky. She staggered up the hill, seeming to sway for an instant before charging onto the porch with the force of a locomotive and the grace of an apparition. Thomas Devlin shouted to her.

She glanced over her shoulder, and he bounded off the truck. She was trying the door, searching the porch for something. She was on a rescue mission; he saw it in her eyes. He crossed the yard in four strides, his arms out to catch her before she entered the burning house.

He called again, but a patch of ice tripped him up. He stumbled, just missed falling, heard the glass break. When he looked up, she had disappeared into the smoke.

Where was she heading? Upstairs? To a bedroom for a sleeping husband? Child? He'd seen that mad look in her eyes during the split second she'd glanced back. The woman had appeared small, desperate, and breathless. She wouldn't have much time before the smoke got to her. Thomas Devlin felt for his regulator, pulled down his face mask, and entered the house. No newcomer to fire, he had been a paid firefighter in Boston before coming to the island ten years ago. But every fire was new, every fire could mean death.

Blue-and-red strobe lights bounced through the smoke until he was three feet inside, and then everything was black. He crawled into the room, his breath through the air mask sounding artificial, like an iron lung. He envisioned the house's floor plan; he had been in plenty like it. It was the design of choice for working-class island families during the thirties, a tinderbox built to withstand hurricanes.

He fixed on the stairs, where he figured she was heading. Moving toward the fire, he heard something drop to the floor off to his left. He changed direction. Feeling his way along the wall, he touched her body before he saw her. He swooped her off the floor and cradled her in his arms. Through his thick rubber coat, he felt her chest rise and fall.

Outside, he held her close, to protect her from the bitter cold. Away from the smoke, he could see

she was clutching a diaper bag. By the way she lay limp in his arms, he knew she was unconscious. Firefighters and police-band groupies milled around; Sarah Tisdale came running with blankets and tank of O₂.

“Anyone else inside?” Brian Grisky shouted.

“She went back after something,” Thomas Devlin said.

He laid her on one blanket and covered her with another while Sarah placed the oxygen mask over her face. Gently, he pried the bag from her hands, intending to look for clues. At the sight of the stuffed toy, the tiny dresses and sweater, his heart began to race. Almost instantly, she came to. She struggled to rise, then fell back. Her hand reached for the bag.

“There's a child inside the house?” he asked, shaking the woman's shoulder. “Where? Tell me where!”

The woman blinked, trying to swallow. She pushed the oxygen mask away. “The house is empty,” she croaked.

“It's empty,” Brian called out. “All clear!”

Soot coated the woman's pale face, making it nearly as dark as her hair. The smoke had swollen her eyes nearly shut. But even though she was half-frozen, half-asphyxiated, Thomas Devlin could see that she was lovely. She had a small body, but only a heart of steel could have made her enter the burning house.

“Where's the child?” he asked, watching her fumble through the soiled diaper bag. She suddenly regained the air of panic he had seen about her when he had thought she was on a mission of rescue. Her eyes darted back and forth, from one side of the bag to the other. She bit her lower lip.

And then she had it: the moment of relief. She threw her head back, then raised it again to look. Her hand closed around something, withdrawing it from the bag. A crumpled sheet of manila paper, one side covered with crayon marks. Tears squeezed out of the corners of her eyes.

“The child?” he asked again, more softly.

“There is no child,” the woman answered, and she turned her head away.

Chapter 2



"I mean, my God," Gabrielle said, bracing herself against the kitchen counter. She had made Anne a plate of sliced apples and cheese, but she couldn't seem to deliver it to the table. Every time she thought of the fire, the danger Anne had put herself in, she'd feel the most dizzying combination of relief and fury.

"Everything is fine," Anne said.

"Everything is not fine!" Gabrielle said, serving the plate with a forceful clatter. "What were you thinking, running back into a burning house?"

"I had to get something."

"Something. You nearly died going in after a thing. A thing!"

Anne just sat there, staring. Gabrielle felt so helpless, completely unable to connect with her younger sister. Growing up, they had kept no secrets from each other. Adulthood and the dramatically different turns their lives had taken had changed that somewhat, but Gabrielle would have said they were still close.

Until Karen's death. Because now, no matter how much Gabrielle wanted to help, no matter how badly she wanted to ease her pain and protect her, she couldn't imagine exactly how it must have felt for Anne to see her four-year-old daughter die.

"I wish you had let us know you were coming to the island," Gabrielle said, instead of what she really wanted to say.

"I didn't know myself until yesterday morning."

"A spur-of-the-moment thing?" Gabrielle asked, hating the small talk.

"Yes."

"Most people want to get off the island in February, not come to it. But then again, you're not"

most people.”

“No,” Anne said blankly. “I’m not.”

Great, Gabrielle thought. She’d been trying to pry a smile out of Anne, alluding to what she teasingly called Anne’s “jet-set life.” But all conversational gambits led back to Karen. In the seven months since Karen died, Gabrielle had lost the ability to talk to her own sister. It was like talking to a shell. Like one of the channeled whelk shells Gabrielle collected on her daily walks on the beach, empty, cold, self-contained, and silent. Talk into one, and your words would echo right back to you.

“I’d been thinking for some time about coming out,” Anne said slowly. “To stay for a while.”

“How long is ‘a while’?”

“Until . . . I don’t know. I just know I can’t stay in New York anymore.”

Gabrielle wasn’t sure whether Anne intended this as an opening, but she dropped the towel she had been folding and took the chair beside Anne’s.

“It must be so hard for you,” she said, holding Anne’s hand.

Anne squeezed back, hard enough to startle Gabrielle. Tears were running down her cheeks, but even now she wouldn’t speak.

“I don’t know how you’ve stayed this long,” Gabrielle said, completing the sentence in her mind: *in the apartment where Karen died.*

“I can’t stand being in the same city as Matt,” Anne said.

“I was thinking more of . . .” Gabrielle began.

But Anne wouldn’t allow her close to the subject of Karen. “I still love him, you know. It’s ridiculous, but I do.”

“I’d like to get my hands on him,” Gabrielle said. Matt had left immediately after the funeral. He had been planning to move out anyway, apparently; Karen’s death was just his excuse.

“Gabrielle?” Anne said, giving the name an inflection at once stern and plaintive.

“Anne,” Gabrielle said, finally exploding. “Is there anything I can talk to you about? We can talk about Matt, you won’t let me near Karen. I loved her, too, you know.”

“Everything’s lost,” Anne said, her voice barely a whisper, her eyes focused on the untouched plate of fruit and cheeses.

“Not everything,” Gabrielle said emphatically. “You can’t think like that.”

Anne didn’t reply.

Frustration, the desire for closeness, had pushed Gabrielle over the edge, and now Anne had retreated even more. Gabrielle needed to be in control of her relationships, and when she wasn't, it drove her crazy. Her mind would start to sizzle; her body must have produced some sort of chemical reaction because she could actually taste frustration in the back of her throat.

Absently, Gabrielle plucked some lint off the sleeve of Anne's beige sweater. Cashmere, she thought, hating herself for noticing. Despising the fact that envy was creeping in.

Gabrielle, who had adored Anne since the moment their parents had brought her home from the hospital, couldn't stand the way she felt. But here she was, married to her perpetually debt-ridden high-school sweetheart and living on the same godforsaken island she had grown up praying would sink into the sea, while Anne was living the good life.

Anne and Matt, so gorgeous and in love, so rich! Every year his business just got better, necessitating more and more exotic business trips, always with Anne along, of course. Every postcard of the Taj Mahal, the northern beaches of Thailand, the Baie des Anges, another trigger for Gabrielle's envy.

And who would have thought that Anne's silly childhood hobby would bring her fame and a six-figure income all her own? That Anne could have become well-known for the delicate little collages she'd fashioned of images cut from postage stamps? Her quirky collages hung in galleries in New York and Tokyo, and the unique pieces had recently been used on the covers of a line of classical-music CDs.

The great irony being that as a child, Gabrielle had been the better artist, had won prizes for her work all through childhood and college—even in contests against Anne.

Now, gazing down at her sister who had “lost everything,” Gabrielle felt poisoned with resentment and the guilt it brought. But life on the island was hard. Especially in winter, when the construction business would stop dead.

She would see Steve drinking beer and watching TV, and instead of screaming at him to get his feet off the goddamn table and his butt out of the easy chair and help her do the dishes, she would stand at the sink wishing Anne's galleries would dump her. Gabrielle would imagine her own teenage daughter, Maggie, making high honors and getting into Harvard while secretly hoping that Karen, who'd been enrolled at some fancy New York kindergarten, would grow up into a troublemaker and dropout.

Thinking of the bad luck she had imagined for Karen, Gabrielle had to turn her face away from Anne. Karen had died a month before she would have entered kindergarten.

“Can you smell the smoke?” Anne asked, raising her wrist to her nose. “One night in the hospital and two showers, and I can still smell it and taste it. The poor house. I burned down our childhood home.”

“Steve says the damage isn't too bad, considering. Three rooms upstairs are ruined, and the roof is sagging. And the wiring was a disaster waiting to happen. He'll fix it.”

“It's nice to have a builder in the family,” Anne said, smiling for the first time since coming to Gabrielle's house.

“Yes, well . . . the insurance check will be a welcome, welcome sight.”

“Your business must be slow this time of year.”

“That's putting it mildly. Although we'll get a boost at Valentine's Day.” The Seduction Table was her catering business. Gabrielle was aiming for the love market, and although it went over big with the summertime yachties, the year-round islanders were too practical and unromantic to buy it.

The telephone rang. Gabrielle saw Anne close her eyes wearily, probably hoping that the call would bring a reprieve from Gabrielle's ministrations.

“Hello,” Gabrielle said, all business, planning to cut short whoever was calling and get back to Anne.

“Gabrielle, hi. It's Thomas Devlin. May I speak with your sister, please?”

“Just a second,” Gabrielle said, covering the mouthpiece with her hand and jostling Anne. “I'll get you for you.”

“Who?” Anne asked, hope shimmering behind the frown in her eyes. She probably thought it was Matt.

“Thomas Devlin. The fireman who went in after you.”

Anne's frown deepened, and she waved the call away. “Tell him I'm asleep.”

Gabrielle hesitated, wishing Anne would make the simple gesture of thanking the man for saving her life. Wouldn't that be the healthy, life-affirming, getting-back-to-normal thing to do?

“Please,” Anne said, sensing that Gabrielle was about to push. “I don't feel like talking. I'll send him a note later.”

“I'm sorry, Thomas,” Gabrielle said directly into the receiver, turning her back on Anne. “She seems to be asleep. But I'll tell her you called.”

“How is she doing?” he asked.

“She's going to be just fine,” Gabrielle said, without a trace of conviction in her voice.

THOMAS Devlin hung up the phone in his workshop and tried to put Anne Davis out of his mind and get

back to work. Cuckoo clocks, grandfather clocks, gold watches, Swiss chimes, inner works with faces covered every inch of wall space and every available tabletop. He had inherited his father's tools and some of his knowledge, but he considered clockmaking a hobby, not a trade.

Every time he entered a burning building, he'd prove it to himself over again: he was a firefighter through and through. The fact amazed him. After the bad fire in Boston so many years ago, the one that had burned off half his face and all of his joy, a betting man would have said that Thomas Devlin was finished as a fireman.

Thomas had believed it himself.

He'd taken refuge on the island, set himself up as a clockmaker, and one day astounded himself by joining the volunteer fire department. Most of the calls they got were routine: grease fires at the Fish House, kids playing with matches behind the school, barbecues run amok. Then there were calls like the one they'd had this week, the house on Salt Whistle Road.

He kept seeing the woman.

His first sight of her, when she was standing in the snow, was vivid in his mind: the fierce beauty in her dark eyes, her clenched fists and the tension in her shoulders, her nightgown molded to her body by the wind.

He remembered how his heart had pounded when he saw her enter the house, even more when he followed her in and realized how hard it would be to find her in the smoke. She had been moving with hurricane force, full of some life-or-death purpose, so it had seemed doubly shocking to find her crumpled on the floor. She had seemed somehow invincible, a woman of superhuman strength. He had lifted her with so little effort: she was light as a feather. Her body had been supple in his arms, and cold, from her standing barefoot in the snow.

Now, working on Emma Harwood's mantel clock, Thomas Devlin pushed the glasses up his nose. The left earpiece rubbed on his scars, making them itch. The wind howled outside, but all he could hear was the clock. Strange that someone who had chosen to work on clocks half the day couldn't stand the sound of ticking. It made him feel trapped. Six-foot-four and using doll-sized tools. Hot and uneasy, he pushed back his chair, knocking over a cigar box full of springs.

"Damn it," he said, watching the minuscule springs roll under the desk, into floor cracks, behind the bookcase. He just stood there scratching his scar. His concentration was useless.

Time for a ride. Anything for some open air, maybe take a drive out to the dunes and watch the waves build. The wind had shifted east, and some good breakers should be rolling in. Stop thinking about the mystery woman who had come to the island. She had upset his balance in a way he couldn't quite define, and that made him feel nervous and ornery.

He threw on his parka and grabbed the truck keys. Just as he stepped outside, damned if Peggy Lawson wasn't pulling down the driveway. She climbed out of her red Neon holding Mac's gold watch at him like a hypnotist on the stage in a New Bedford dive.

“Loses ten minutes every other day,” Peggy said, her voice raspy from cigarettes.

“I’ll give it a look,” Thomas said.

“Sure you have time? I hear you’re pretty busy being a hero these days.”

“Oh, the Salt Whistle fire?” he asked casually, recalling that Hugh Lawson, Peggy and Mac’s nephew, had been at the scene.

“I hear you saved the lady of the house,” Peggy said in a way that made it clear she had a story to tell.

“Anne Davis. Do you know her?”

“Of course. She’s an island girl, born and bred, just like me. Though she certainly tried to put me behind her. Know what I mean?”

Thomas Devlin knew that nothing but sorrow could come from listening to rumors, so he started to edge toward his truck. But Peggy’s car was blocking him.

“I went to school with her sister, Gabrielle. You know Gaby Vincent, don’t you? Steve’s wife?”

“Sure,” Thomas said, amazed all over again. He couldn’t quite picture it, the woman he had rescued being related to Gabrielle. Gabrielle had big bones, big red hair, a big Ford van, and a laugh that would echo from here to Nantucket. Nothing seemed to faze her. Anne was small. Entering the house, she had moved like a linebacker. But later, when Thomas had laid her down and she opened her eyes, Thomas could see that something inside had broken. That whatever had hurt her was worse than the fire.

“She was a wild one, Anne was. And trouble has certainly followed her. Money can’t always buy happiness.”

“No, well . . .”

“She married it, and a lot of good it did her.”

“She’s married?”

“Separated. Divorced, something like that. He walked out.”

Thomas didn’t want to hear any more. The wind stung his ears, and he could practically see the waves, mountains of green water trailing foamy crests behind. He would park by the clay cliffs and walk to the lighthouse. Clear his head. Tonight he’d eat leftover beef stew and write a letter to his son Ned, away at boarding school. Have a quiet night and try to shake this case of nerves.

“I’ll see what I can do about Mac’s watch,” Thomas said. “Thanks for bringing it by.”

“Well, who else would I take it to? And I did want to tell you we think you’re quite a hero. Anne”

Davis is lucky to be alive. She has you to thank. She might have gone the way of her child.”

The hair on the back of Thomas Devlin's neck stood on end, and it wasn't the wind.

“Her child?”

“Oh, you haven't heard? It happened last summer. A darling little girl. She used to play with Hugh's daughter, Sadie.”

Thomas Devlin had the impulse to walk away, to deprive Peggy of the satisfaction she was getting from this. But he had to know.

“What happened?” he asked, his pulse drowning out the sound of the wind.

“The little girl died. Fell four stories. Anne was right there, poor thing. Although the police were very suspicious. For a while we thought there'd be charges.”

Somehow he had known. She had said there was no child, but he hadn't believed her. He thought back to the fire, to the way she had run back to the burning house. Everyone at the scene had been disgusted, that the woman would risk her own life and everyone else's for what had appeared to be a diaper bag.

Everyone but Thomas Devlin. He had seen the clothes and toys of a little girl, had recognized the look of loss in the woman's eyes. He had recognized himself. Anne Davis had witnessed the death of someone she loved.

His scars were throbbing, as they often did when the weather changed. Snow was coming. He could feel it in the air. He made a little more small talk with Peggy, gave her some excuse about having to be somewhere. By the time he got into his truck, the pain was shooting up and down the left side of his face. He scowled, knowing his only salvation was to empty his mind. Images of fire were flashing behind his eyes, and he fought to put them down. Passing a girl who might have been Maggie Vincent, Anne's niece, he was blind to the landscape. He thought only of driving toward the east window.

MAGGIE Vincent had dropped off her schoolbooks, changed into tighter jeans, and headed out to meet Kurt, Eugene, and Vanessa, all without running into her evil mother. Or Anne. She knew Anne was in the kitchen with her mother.

Maggie wore a white angora sweater she'd liberated from the Living Doll Shop, Kurt's leather jacket, six gold hoop earrings (not counting the one she'd recently inserted into her nipple), zero makeup (eat your heart out, Vanessa), and motorcycle boots she'd found at the South End Sally Ann last time she and Vanessa had hitched to Boston. So they were a little too big—like three sizes—but she'd stuffed the toes with Kleenex and everything was cool.

She was walking down Teatime Lane. God, she couldn't wait to move someplace where even the road didn't have some cutey-pie historical, tourist-pleasing name. Like New York City: Fifth Avenue, Forty-second Street. No bullshit there. Out of nowhere, a kick-ass Chevy Blazer came screaming along, and everyone was in it, Kurt at the wheel.

"Tell me I'm not seeing this!" Maggie said, tonguing his ear as she climbed onto his lap.

Even with his mouth on Maggie's, Kurt managed to execute an Indy-worthy burnout, his eyes never leaving the road.

"Do I want to know where you got this?" she asked when Kurt stopped kissing her.

"Marcy whatever-her-name-is, the bank chick," Vanessa said, handing Maggie the pint of Southern Comfort, "left it at the ferry, and we found the spare key in her little magnetic key box."

"How'd you know there was one?" Maggie asked.

"Cause with a chick like that, there's always a spare key in a little magnetic key box," Kurt said.

"Little Miss Perfect type," Vanessa said, squealing at whatever Eugene was doing to her.

"So, where are we going?" Maggie asked. "I guess we can't use the old house."

"Yeah, real sweet," Kurt said. "Your dipshit aunt's there less than a day, and she burns the place down."

"Sorry to inconvenience you," Maggie said, stung. She climbed off his lap and sat as far as possible away from him in the passenger seat.

"She the one who killed her kid?" Eugene asked.

Maggie shrugged. Kurt didn't realize how badly he could hurt her with his words, the tone of his voice, the way he'd act all displeased and angry with her.

"Maybe she burned the place down on purpose," Vanessa said, giggling. "Maybe she's a pyromaniac *and* a killer."

"You gotta admit, she's got one hell of a touch," Kurt said. Although Maggie was staring out the window, she caught a glimpse of him reflected in the glass. He'd glanced her way. That made her feel a little better. She turned her head toward him slightly. The bottle came around again, and Maggie took a swallow.

"My dad said she acted real strange at the fire," Eugene said. "She ran back inside, and everyone thought she was going after a kid or a dog or something, but they carry her out and she's holding a paper bag or something. Guys could have gotten killed, and for what? A paper bag? Probably had her jewelry in it or something."

"Rich bitch," Vanessa said.

~~“The freaky giant, Mr. What's-his-face Devlin, ended up going in after her,” Kurt said.~~

“The jolly green scarface,” Vanessa said.

“I mean, who gives a flying fuck if she wants to kill herself?” Eugene asked. He took a long slurp then burped. “Serves her right, after what she did. But those guys are out there risking their lives for a kid killer and her jewelry?”

“Can we please talk about something else?” Maggie asked quietly.

“Hey, your aunt ruined our party spot,” Vanessa said, jabbing the back of Maggie's shoulder. “The least you can do is give us the gory details. Tell us what she did to her kid.”

“It was an accident,” Maggie said.

“That's not what the papers said,” Vanessa said. “Or the TV news.”

Sometimes Maggie hated Vanessa so much she couldn't stand it. Didn't the idiot ever listen to herself? Like anyone would consider the TV news an authority on anything.

“I distinctly remember hearing that it was way more than an accident,” Vanessa said. “Like murder. What are you defending her for? I thought you hated your family. Just admit she killed your cousin, and get over it.”

Karen. Maggie thought back to last August, when Anne, Matt, and Karen had come out to the island for their usual summer vacation. Everyone knew you couldn't drag Maggie to a family thing but it was different when the Davises were around.

Especially Karen. Maggie hadn't known a little kid could be so smart and funny. Better company than anyone she knew. She had found herself hanging out with them all the time, babysitting for Karen at night when their parents would head into town. Maggie and Karen were like sisters, really. At least that's how Maggie felt and it's what Karen had said.

Just thinking about it, Maggie used the knuckle of her right index finger to wipe away tears.

“All choked up?”

“Shut up, Vanessa,” Maggie said.

“Just tell us. Where does the news get off calling your aunt a murderer if she's not one?”

“There was an investigation. That's all. There's always an investigation when someone dies.”

“Your aunt was the only one there, though. And everyone saw her looking out, even before the kid hit the ground. That's sick. She must have seen the whole thing.”

“I didn't know about that part,” Kurt said, looking over at Maggie. “Gross.”

Maggie couldn't stand thinking of Anne seeing Karen die. She closed her eyes, as if she could block the image from her mind. But that only made it more vivid. Her eyelids flew open, and she looked wildly around at the landscape flying by. Red barn, snowfield, power lines, lighthouse way off in the distance. She watched the light flash red, white, red, white, red, white for a few seconds, until she felt calm again. She reached back for the bottle.

“Not till you tell,” Vanessa said, hugging the nearly empty bottle to her chest.

“She fell out the window,” Maggie said. “That's all, she just fell. She hit the sidewalk and died. Now give me the bottle.”

ANNE Davis lay under a blanket on the sofa, pretending to sleep. They had given her a sedative at the hospital, but she had fought it, as she had learned to fight sedatives last August, and she felt tired but wired. Gabrielle was putting the finishing touches on a dinner she had made for two people celebrating a fifteenth wedding anniversary. Between canapés and sauce moutarde she kept slipping in from the kitchen, to make sure Anne hadn't moved. Anne couldn't wait to be alone in the house. Faking sleep, she thought of her daughter.

Even at four, Karen had liked to read after bedtime. Anne had totally approved. As if they were unaware, Anne and Matt would kiss Karen good night and turn out the light. They would put a CD on the stereo and try to forget that Karen was waiting for the coast to be clear.

How could they forget that their four-year-old, who had nursery school at eight-thirty the next morning, would read until midnight if they let her? Karen would wait until they left her room, then turn on her flashlight. She would open a book—*Desmo the Incredible Kitten* or *The Little Mermaid* (she especially liked stories with lots of animals in them)—and read until someone stopped her.

Karen had an amazing imagination. You could hear her talking out loud, conjuring up characters. While she was reading *101 Dalmations* she would pretend to be Lucky, the littlest puppy who hadn't yet gotten her spots, and she would hide under the covers with her imaginary parents, Pongo and Perdita, from Cruella DeVille. Anne would stand in the hall, listening to her incredible child.

She would always make noise before going in to check on her, to give Karen enough time to fall asleep. She would shuffle her feet, or clear her throat before opening the door. Then she would tiptoe over to the maple bed. There Karen would be, her lashes resting angelically on her pink cheeks, the covers drawn to her chin, her arm convincingly tucked, pillowlike, under her head.

Perhaps unwittingly, Anne imitated her now. She lay on the sofa, her arm crooked under her head, the sound of her wristwatch ticking in her ears as she tried to fool Gabrielle into thinking that she was fine, resting comfortably. She was Lucky playing dead, to escape detection by Cruella. The effort made Anne feel easy, closer to her daughter.

Lying there, Anne's mind darted to Maggie, then away again. Maggie hadn't once spoken to her since she had come to the island. Since Karen had died, for that matter. Anne vaguely remembered seeing Maggie at the funeral. Anne had lunged, to kiss her, and suddenly Maggie wasn't there. Dejected down, Anne wondered whether Maggie believed the rumors, but she didn't wonder too hard. If Maggie did believe them, Anne didn't really want to know.

The kitchen door opened, closed, then opened and closed again. Anne heard Gabrielle approach, sigh audibly, and shuffle her feet. Anne breathed steadily through her mouth, her elbow tucked under her head. Gabrielle stood still, watching. With her eyes closed, Anne could feel Gabrielle's gaze; just as surely, she knew that Gabrielle realized that Anne was faking sleep.

The sisters let it be; Gabrielle packed up her van, and she left.

This was the first time Anne had been alone in the house since she'd been released from the hospital. She rose from the sofa and went into the family room. A gallery of family photos covered one wall. Stuffy portraits of grandparents, wedding photos, Maggie's school pictures, shots of the Vincents and Davises on holidays and summer vacations.

Anne stood before the wall, as if challenging it. Her eyes went directly to a picture taken on the beach last summer. It showed Anne, Matt, and Karen building a sandcastle by the water's edge. Maggie stood in the background. She had been helping with the castle, Anne remembered, but had stepped away when Gabrielle said she wanted to take a shot of the Davises alone.

There was Karen, placing a piece of pale green sea glass over the princess's window. She was smiling for the camera, but her eyes had a sidelong glance, as if she didn't want to be torn away from working on the castle. She had already adorned it with garlands of periwinkle and mussel shells. Using her little hand, she had scooped out and molded balconies of sand for the princess, king, and queen.

Her brown hair curled damply; the day had been scorching hot, and Karen and Anne had just taken their third swim of the morning. Her skin was brown, and she wore the pink bikini Maggie had given her the first day of vacation.

Anne stared at the photo for a long time with no change in expression. It was a happy moment frozen forever on film. That was how she viewed it. It didn't particularly move her one way or another.

The photograph didn't show that Anne and Matt had had a bitter fight before breakfast the morning after, or that before sunset he would be on a plane to La Guardia. It didn't show that ten minutes after Gabrielle snapped the shot, she served a picnic lunch, and Karen and Anne had shared a tuna fish sandwich and a glass of lemonade. It didn't show Karen and Anne waiting for low tide, to go crabbing in the tidal pools. It didn't show Karen falling out the window eight days later.

The photograph didn't make Karen seem real or present or faraway to Anne.

For those sensations, Anne dug into the canvas bag she'd rescued from the fire.

Karen's drawing. Sitting on the floor, Anne spread it across her knees. She loved to touch it. The paper was yellow manila, coarse-grained, the variety favored by kindergartners everywhere. Karen had

used fourteen different crayons to color the picture for Anne.

Anne brought the paper to her face. It smelled like smoke now, but if she concentrated she could bring back the scent of crayon wax. Touching the surface, she could trace the smooth, slick tracks of Karen's crayons. It was so real, something she could hold in her hands, a drawing Karen might have finished just five minutes ago. It felt the same, smelled almost the same, looked exactly the same, as if she had the moment Karen had presented it to her.

It was a picture of things Karen loved, all blended together in the epic vision of a preschooler.

It showed her room—everything pink, her favorite color—at home; Mommy, Daddy, and Karen playing in Gramercy Park; Karen and Maggie building a castle at the beach. Between Karen in the park and Karen at the beach were two puzzling white-speckled boxes.

For a four-year-old, Karen could draw beautifully. She gave her people smiles and eyebrows, five fingers on each hand, clothes that she had seen them wear. Her beach had rocks and shells; her ocean had a shark (sharks scared her more than anything—for weeks after seeing *The Little Mermaid*, she had nightmares about the shark), a sea horse, and minnows. Gramercy Park had squirrels, a wrought-iron fence protecting red tulips, and a multistoried white birdhouse. Karen on the beach had red fingernails, like Maggie; in the park with her parents, her nails were unpainted.

“It's my best and favorite thing,” Karen had said proudly, giving the picture to Anne.

Anne had accepted it, delighted. She and Karen had examined it together, not speaking. Except for the white boxes, she recognized every image and knew where it fit in Karen's conception of her world.

“What's this?” Anne asked, pointing at one spotted box.

“Don't you know?” Karen asked, her brow creasing. Suddenly she looked troubled, as if her mother had failed to understand something basic and vital.

Anne shook her head.

“It's paradise,” Karen said.

“Oh, I love you,” Anne said, pulling Karen into her arms. A picture of the people and places Karen loved the most: paradise. The boxes didn't matter. Nothing mattered compared with that.

Now, sitting on the floor of Gabrielle's family room, Anne stared at Karen's picture of paradise. Karen had colored it the morning of her fall. When Anne was alone with the picture, when she blocked everything else out, she could believe that Karen had done it five minutes ago, not seven months. She could believe that Karen was right beside her.

It was a real piece of paper, colored with real Crayola crayons from the big box with all the colors, by Anne's real little girl. Photographs were just frozen moments, but paradise was forever.

The telephone rang. It startled her. She started to stand, but then her gaze was drawn back to Karen's picture. Every time she put the picture away, she had the sense of leaving Karen. She was ready to do that yet today. Not right now. She closed her eyes and smelled the crayon again. She felt full and as close to peaceful as was possible for her. The hollowness would return soon enough.

Sitting on the floor with paradise, Anne blocked out the ringing phone and let the answering machine do its work.

Chapter 3



Matt Davis had an affair, and it ruined his life. Until it happened to him, until he'd been swept away by another woman, he would have said that he believed unfailingly in marriage. He believed in the love, nourishment, and challenges that it brought two people; he believed in Anne. She had given him so much. Together they'd had a child, the most precious thing in their lives. But by last summer, when Matt and Anne celebrated their tenth wedding anniversary, he was in the midst of a love affair that had been going on for eight months.

Flying home from Paris, he tried to concentrate on paperwork. He was the president of the American branch of a French perfume company; his job was to sell design houses and celebrities on the idea of launching their own fragrance line. He traveled all the time. Although work could be tiresome, it was the only thing that kept his sorrow at bay. He wondered about Anne, alone all the time. Not working. Sometimes when he thought of Karen, it was all he could do to keep from smashing windows, from howling at the moon.

His life was full of glamour. He lived in New York, but kept a permanent bungalow at the Beverly Hills Hotel and a suite in Paris's Plaza Athénée. He flew the Concorde twice a week, often with a movie-star client. He made frequent excursions to Grasse, in Provence, where the flowers were the most beautiful, their scents the most refined.

He and Anne had planned to buy a farm near Grasse.

Anne had come into his life eleven years ago. They were both twenty-five; he was a perfume executive and she was temping in his New York office. He noticed her immediately. She had big, dark eyes that would have been sultry if they weren't so wide-open and innocent, as if she was taking everything in. She seemed very different from the girls he was dating, and he liked looking at her. He had the feeling she hadn't been in New York for very long.

Even after they married, after ten years on Gramercy Park, Anne hadn't really seemed comfortable in New York. She needed sea air and sand in her shoes. She was always happiest on the island. So, although it made sense to Matt that she would return there now, it scared him because it put her just that much farther out of his reach.

Sometimes he wondered whether Anne would eventually have forgiven him if Karen hadn't died. But his betrayal and Karen's fall were so closely linked in time and event that Matt believed he created some evil confluence. If Anne hadn't seen him and Tisa together, if she hadn't had that on her mind, she might have been paying more attention to Karen, and it might never have happened.

The strange thing was, he'd been planning to leave Anne for Tisa. He had fallen in love with another woman. He felt terrible; he didn't understand why it had happened, but it had. For months, he and Tisa had been planning their life together. He knew he would have to tell Anne, and together they would have to tell Karen, but he kept putting it off.

He had planned to tell Anne before they went to the island. Then she and Karen would go away alone; by the time they returned to New York, he would have moved out. But when the moment came, he couldn't do it. Karen had spent winter Saturdays learning to swim at the Y, and he didn't want to miss her first summer in the waves.

He'd made the mistake of giving Tisa the island house's phone number. She was furious, and she called constantly. When Anne or Karen answered, she would hang up. Matt took to diving for the phone. Suddenly all those months of excuses seemed to add up for Anne. She didn't say anything, but Matt could see that she knew. It was mysterious, her sad anger, and he couldn't bear to confront it.

Instead, he picked a fight with her one morning before breakfast and was on a plane to New York by sunset.

Stupid bastard, he thought, staring at the airfone on the seat back ahead of him. Anne caught him two days later, when she herself returned home early. She'd left Karen with Gabrielle and Steve, flown to New York to try to patch things up with Matt.

Or maybe she'd had an inkling and wanted to catch him in the act.

Which she did. In their own bedroom at the rear of the building, with late-afternoon light streaming in, the light Anne had always loved most because it would turn their white sheets peachy rose and make their glistening bodies appear even more flushed. In her own bed, in her favorite light, Anne discovered her own husband fucking his girlfriend.

She kicked him out instantly. Tisa lost a diamond earring in the process. Matt left without his underwear. Standing on Gramercy Park West, dazed and ashamed, he hailed a cab. He held the cab door for Tisa; before following her, he looked up and saw Anne standing at the window of their fourth-floor apartment. She was staring down at him. From that angle he couldn't see for sure, but he thought she was crying. In that split second, before he climbed into the cab, he realized that his marriage was over. That he would never hold Anne again.

He was wrong. Eight days later he held her in his arms in the emergency room at Bellevue, where they had brought Karen's body. And two days after that he held her again, at Karen's funeral. That was the last time.

Now, thinking of Anne, he reached for the airfone. He zipped his credit card down the magnet slot and dialed the island house. He got the same damned recording he'd gotten last night: "The

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