

Prologue
Charleston, South Carolina
September 1989

In the hurricane's aftermath, devastation had its own smell, stronger, sweeter than he remembered. Yet it wasn't in the humid air that lingered from the storm. To Nick Granby, surveying his ruined garden, the updated memory of destruction would always smell like crushed flowers.

Nick frowned at such waste. It was everywhere.

Three days ago Hurricane Hugo had thundered across South Carolina like General Sherman's troops more than a century before, and, shifting his gaze now from a bed of flattened asters, Nick could only stare at his favorite palmetto, leaning like a drunken Union horse soldier against the house. Sure, he'd seen other roofs caved into attics; the main bearing beams were still solid, his practiced architect's eye kept noting; structurally, his home was sound. Then why did he keep feeling like a ten-year-old boy again, on that cold Connecticut morning when he had cried over his family's flooded fields? The day Nick had decided he wouldn't become a farmer like his father and his father before that.

At twilight he stood in the open doorway leading from what his Gullah housekeeper called the drawin' room and thanked God for the Low Country's warmer weather. More rain was predicted for tomorrow, though, like a voodoo curse heaped upon a curse, and he'd have to replace the shattered glass in the French doors before then.

Squaring his shoulders, he went inside. The blush pink single house he'd bought five years ago on Charleston's famed Rainbow Row had suffered little severe damage, none that couldn't be repaired. Personally, he knew he'd been damn lucky in the storm. Professionally ...

He shrugged. He'd think about bankruptcy, about his coastal resort complex, which had been three-quarters finished when the hurricane hit, and which now sat three-quarters under water; but he'd think about it later. He almost smiled. Born contrary, his father always said, though Nick preferred to call himself determined. Somehow he'd save Seaview, too.

His boots crunched over glass shards on the Tabriz carpet, coated with a glaze of coastal lowlands mud. It was beginning to stink, not of flowers. Just now the entire room bore scant resemblance to the elegant, watered silk-papered, pecan wood-trimmed, antique-filled space he'd come to love. Even Carran, after spring flood, hadn't looked this bad.

At the Sheraton sideboard he poured himself a shot of whiskey, neat, knowing he'd find no ice in the refrigerator. There was no electricity in the house, or, in fact, in all of Charleston. In swift gulps he downed the warm scotch. It burned like acid but, oddly, cleared his head.

Then lifting his gaze, he wished he hadn't as he met his father's disapproving stare among the family pictures on the sideboard's mahogany top. His parents. His grandfather. The farmhouse where Nick had been born, where he was still considered a traitor for leaving. A traitor, almost three decades after the flood. A traitor, twelve years after he'd finally moved away. He picked up another photograph, one of his best friend, Ben, holding his son, a pudgy toddler then. Ben's wife, smiling in the old picture, had died six months ago.

Nick's gaze darkened. Something else was missing. Someone.

Catching the glint of bright brass against the muddy carpet, he bent down. The missing frame had been dented, its glass smashed into sharp diagonal lines. Without thinking, he ran a finger over the face he had loved so well and cut himself. He didn't see the blood. He pried the glass pieces away, feeling as if he'd hurt her again instead of himself.

What would she think of him now, his gut still twisting at her smile, the white cap and gown, ash blond hair hanging to her waist, blue eyes bright with hope that graduation day? His pulse beat heavily. She probably wouldn't care—just like his father at his mother's funeral.

Nick's stomach clenched at the memory, and he swigged more scotch. "Don't bother coming back here again on my account," Tom Granby had said two years ago.

Suddenly the house seemed stifling, and he needed air, needed to walk. Yet the warm sea air didn't help; and neither did picking his way along the debris-littered Battery overlooking Charleston harbor's Fort Sumter, where the first shots of the Civil War had been fired.

In the soft, sunset breeze off the water, he tried, but failed, to repress the harsh thoughts of Tom, and the more tender memories triggered by a broken picture. He tried to forget the helplessness he'd felt for the past three days, the restlessness that had plagued him ... for how long?

Not only since the storm, he realized. Years, he thought, glancing back at his house, then across the street toward the prestigious yacht club where he'd attended so many balls and parties, squiring the city's magnolia-skinned beauties, young women he knew he couldn't marry. He'd always known he'd never really belong in Charleston, but that didn't bother him. He'd never belonged in Carran either.

And hell, he didn't care. Almost a thousand miles from his father's farm, he had what he wanted, what he'd worked hard to get, what he just might lose after all. His mouth tightened. Like hell he'd lose it. He had made his choices—but so had Tom—and he was staying right here. Besides, trying to make peace with his father would mean going back to Carran.

She wouldn't be there, he knew. She had married someone else. With the thought, he stopped walking, leaned against the seawall and, for a long while, stared out across the harbor, his gaze unfocused, remembering, regretting.

Ah, Jess ... I didn't want to leave you.

Chapter 1

Carran, Connecticut

Six months later

"I suppose I ought to warn you," her brother had said, hesitant as ever when the subject came up. "Nick Granby's back in town."

Only hours ago those few words had seemed to chase Jessica Pearce Simon from a highway telephone booth, along the curving two-lane road that fell and rose and dipped again into Carran. Home, Jessie had thought, before Ben's warning turned anticipation into dread; now, stubborn as Nick himself, the words still followed her around Ben's dining room table, like footsteps echoing a past she hoped she'd forgotten.

Setting the table for dinner, she felt her fingers tremble on a plate that had been her grandmother's, and hastily put it down. She'd come here looking, hoping, to find peace, and ordinarily the familiar china would have been enough to make her feel serene. Now she noticed that the gold had worn from the plate's rim.

Perhaps she shouldn't have come.

If only she'd let Ben know before this afternoon that she was on her way, but ...

"Leaving Scottsdale was an act of bravery," she'd explained, just inside his front door. "If you'd uttered one word to discourage me, I'd have stayed in Arizona and let the ink dry on my divorce decree."

"If I'd mentioned Nick, you mean."

Jessie's pulse had lurched then, and it lurched again now. Ridiculous, she thought. Too much time had passed for Nick to pose a threat to her peace of mind, for any hurt to remain. She wasn't an adoring child, or a trusting adolescent, but a grown woman. She wrote fiction—when she could—but she didn't live the fantasy, not any longer. She even smiled faintly, admitting only to some curiosity. Maybe in twelve years he had lost his hair, his muscle tone, his charm ...

Though she wasn't that curious. Nick might be in Carran for whatever reason, but he wouldn't stay, and while he was here, she'd simply make sure she didn't see him.

"Dad?" The front door slammed, startling Jessie from her determined reverie as a male voice called out, "Whose BMW's in the drive?" Then her nephew poked his head around the dining room doorway, his brown hair windblown, his lithe frame looking as if it were still in motion. "Jessie! When'd you get here? I didn't know you were coming."

"No one did. A couple of hours ago," she said and held out her arms. Laughing, she had to look up into his blue eyes. They were the exact shade of Ben's, but on her last visit she'd met them on a level. "My goodness, you've grown."

"Aw, you always say that." He'd barely hugged her before he stepped back, red-faced. "Hey, I was sorry to hear about you and Uncle Peter, splitting up. Raw deal."

Jessie agreed but didn't get to answer.

"Greg, is that you?" Ben yelled from the kitchen. "It's after seven. Where have you been?"

"Tell you later." As if he'd been shot from a cannon, Greg bounded for the stairs. "Gotta wash up for supper. I'm starved."

By the time Ben stopped dead, halfway through the kitchen's swinging door, Greg was splashing water in the upstairs bathroom. "He certainly has energy to spare," Jessie

said, delighted.

But Ben's tone was sour. "Why shouldn't he? He doesn't have a job to drain it off." He handed a surprised Jessie a fistful of silverware. "Here ... I forgot. Set another place for dinner."

"Company?" Jessie traced a finger over the fluted handle of a fork, her tone softening. "This is Gran's too, isn't it? Like the china?"

"Her wedding china. She gave it to me, remember, and the silver, when Beth and I got married."

The swift pang of memory made Jessie's eyes fill. Her grandmother had loved to entertain. She'd loved people, and she'd loved good food; the combination had always seemed irresistible, and she'd set an elaborate table, especially for Thanksgiving dinner. Was her house, so full of happy memories, still there?

Jessie wished she hadn't resisted the urge to stop at the abandoned farm on her way into Carran. But she'd known that, early in spring, the old farm lane would be thick with mud and treacherous ruts, so she'd driven on, telling herself that her life had enough ruts just now: her shattered marriage and self-esteem, a stubborn writer's block. As soon as she could leave Arizona, she'd needed to see Carran and her only nephew, and Ben.

He smiled a little. "On holidays Gran's whole house would smell like cinnamon. She had a heavy hand with it."

"Um, the spices." Jessie's stomach growled. "Cloves and sage and ginger. Her sweet potato casserole, with brown sugar and marshmallows crusted on top. Mom's chestnut stuffing. Gran's pumpkin pies."

"And Dad, complaining that the house was stuffy—then throwing all the doors wide to let the air in." He paused, his gaze meeting hers. "The cold air, and Nick."

Jessie bit her lip. She'd have been watching for him then, for hours. "As if Nick's mother didn't cook like Julia Child on holidays herself."

With brisk motions, she set the fourth service beside a plate. Years ago the ornate silver pattern had moved with Ben, from the farm where he and Jessie had been raised, the six miles into Carran. But here or there the memories had stayed the same, and Jessie treasured them. Most of them, anyway. "It's good to be home, Ben," she finally said.

"It's good to have you." He gave her a long, steady look. "Jessie, I . . ."

"What?"

"Uh ... nothing."

Then he scooted back into the kitchen as if to escape some impending disaster. Or his own feelings? Ben had always been closemouthed, but since his wife's death a year ago, he had apparently become even more taciturn. Jessie's conversation with him since her arrival had been sparse.

Frowning with concern, she used the last napkin to polish a water spot from a glass. A fourth place at a table set with company china, good silver, etched crystal? Ben hadn't said who their guest would be. Greg's girlfriend? Ben had mentioned one, not in glowing terms, but Jessie didn't have time to wonder at her growing sense of unease.

The doorbell rang. Jessie fumbled the red taper she'd been trying to jam into the glass candle holder. The bell chimed again. "Ben?"

"Get that, will you? I'm up to my elbows in meat loaf and chili sauce."

Her frown deepened. Ben wasn't a panicky cook, not like Jessie, for whom the microwave must have been invented. She started toward the front door, dread following

her as, a few hours ago, her brother's warning had chased her the last miles into Carran.

In the next instant, with the simple act of pulling on a doorknob, all the oxygen seemed to get sucked from her lungs. Jessie tried to catch her breath but couldn't. She should have known. His dark hair shining under the porch light, hands shoved deep into his pockets, he stood whistling softly to himself, looking right at home, looking as if he'd never left Carran, or the farm ... or her. He'd even rung the bell twice.

"Nick," she mouthed but no sound came out.

His whistled rendition of "Dixie" stopped in midphrase as he took a step backward. "My God," he said. "How did Ben arrange this?"

"I didn't. Jessie did it for me. Hi, Nick." Coming to the door, Ben gripped her shoulders to hold her in place. "Her coming was a surprise. She arrived this afternoon. I'm afraid I didn't tell her you'd be here for dinner."

"Didn't trust her with your loaded shotgun in the house?" Grinning, Nick let his gaze travel over her, warming every inch from head to toe. Jessie looked away.

"Come on in," Ben said. "You look out on your feet."

Nick stepped inside, and Jessie's accusing gaze met Ben's.

"Nick's father had a stroke two days ago," he explained gently. "Nick's been at the hospital day and night."

"Oh, Ben." Shock raced through her. Shock, and sorrow. The Granbys had been like family to her once, as dear as her brother and Gran. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I wanted to. I tried," Ben said, "but. . . I thought you wouldn't listen."

Jessie felt ashamed of herself. Poor Tom, she thought, and before she could stop herself, poor Nick. "I'm sorry. Is there anything we can do?"

Nick shook his head. "It's a matter of time. The doctors don't know yet how he'll come out of this. His right side's paralyzed. His memory's touch and go. He can barely talk."

Ben cleared his throat. "When Nick called this morning—before I knew you were coming, Jessie—he said there wasn't much food in Tom's house, and I knew he wouldn't want to shop after all day at the hospital. I thought he could use some home cooking tonight." Ben smiled. "Even mine."

In Jessie's opinion he could have bought a frozen dinner and nuked it, but she didn't say so. "It'll be a change from some five-star restaurant in Charleston."

"A welcome change," Nick said; then Ben drew her aside.

"If you were five years old, I'd spank you. I still might. No matter what you think, Nick's a good guy. Take it easy, he's feeling pretty bad—guilty—about Tom."

Ben was right, of course, but Jessie resented that, too. If Nick felt so guilty, why hadn't he stayed to run the farm with Tom? The question was rhetorical; she already knew why he'd gone to South Carolina. She had learned that the hard way one night in Gran's apple orchard twelve years ago.

"I'm leaving you two to sort things out," Ben said. "No violence." He clapped Nick on the back. "Come out to the kitchen when you've signed the truce. I've got a cold Molson ale with your name on it."

"Thanks, Ben."

Nick's quiet tone made Jessie look up, and for the first time since she'd opened the door, she really saw him. He'd stopped smiling. The fatigue Ben had noted made his broad shoulders slump, pulled the corners of his mouth tight, deepened the shadows in his

eyes. She'd been wrong. Nick had changed, but not as she'd hoped.

He seemed taller than she remembered, more solid than in his high school football days, but the thick, dark hair was the same, she told herself. The red chamois shirt, navy down vest, and faded jeans looked familiar, so familiar that Jessie could feel her fingers tucked into his back pocket as they strolled together across a sunset pasture. She could smell sweet fresh-cut hay and hear cows lowing near Tom Granby's barn.

But his somber brown-eyed gaze bothered her. It seemed more than fatigue, more than worry over Tom's illness, and Jessie couldn't seem to look away. Nick couldn't either.

"Come here," he said at last, opening his arms, obviously expecting her to walk into them. When she hesitated, a slow smile spread across his mouth, the smile she'd once loved. "Leave the guns at the door and say, 'Welcome home, Nick.' "

Her pulse pounded but she didn't move. "Welcome home."

Nick shook his head. Then he took a step, toward her, and so did Jessie, a step aside, misjudging the distance between them. Nick's body brushed hers, so close that she could hear the discreet tick of his watch.

"Not so fast," he said, and when he moved again, she stopped counting seconds, heartbeats. "Not so easy."

Grasping her upper arms, his touch gentle, he tilted his head. His smile fading, his eyes holding hers until they drifted shut, Nick bent to her mouth, meeting it lightly, softly, in a grazing surprise of a kiss, his mouth just barely on hers; but the kiss sent blood coursing through her veins and Jessie went limp.

"That's better," he whispered. "Welcome home yourself, love. You sure are a sight for tired eyes."

Then, as quickly as he'd kissed her, he pulled back, touched her cheek, and left her standing near the door. Stunned, speechless, Jessie watched him walk through the dining room to the kitchen doorway, where he said something to Ben, their rich male laughter a buzz of memory from her girlhood. Jessie stared blindly down at the fourth table setting.

Nick Granby's back in town.

Despite the sad circumstance of Nick's return, nobody had been happier than Benjamin Pearce to see his closest friend. He and Nick had been friends from the day nine-year-old Ben and his parents moved in with his grandmother, six months before Jessie was born.

Theirs hadn't been an auspicious meeting, Ben remembered, nor the move one he'd had much enthusiasm for. He hadn't unpacked his baseball cards before he got the urge to explore his new, unwanted surroundings, which seemed preferable to feeding his grandmother's nasty-tempered Rhode Island Reds at the henhouse. Instead, he climbed the hill behind her barn, skirted the family cemetery at its crest—in case there might be ghosts—then plunged down the slope to the barbed wire fence that defined the Pearce farm boundary. Gazing at the herd of Guernsey cattle in the adjoining pasture, and daydreaming about the friends he'd left behind, Ben leaned on a fence post.

"That's our line," someone said, startling him. He watched a boy roughly his own age emerge from the cow herd and pick his way across the meadow. "I stretched wire last

week, I won't do it again." He scowled at Ben. "Are you Caroline's grandson?"

Ben jumped to attention. "Yes." The other boy stood half a head taller; his hands looked hard, and tough, like the rest of him. "I'm sorry about the fence."

"You knock it over, and you'll plant it yourself next time. I don't need any more chores. 'Be a help or you're a hindrance,' my pop says."

"I didn't know."

"You'll learn." Then he said bluntly, "Your mom's pregnant, isn't she?" and Ben flushed. His mother's growing stomach embarrassed him, though the baby wasn't due until May. Suddenly the other boy grinned. "I heard it from Caroline. She wants a girl. But if your dad's going to try farming, you'd better hope your mom has another boy. Take it from me, I used to pray for a baby brother. But my mom can't have more, so I guess I'm stuck, Pearce. What's your first name?"

"Ben."

The boy stuck out a hand. "If you can climb this fence without tearing those brand-new overalls, I'll show you my pop's cows up close." He helped Ben clamber over the wire. "Watch where you walk. There's cow flops. We got a horse, too," he continued, "and I got a dog of my own. When she has pups, maybe I'll give you one. My name's Nick. Nick Granby."

Soon joined by their common loathing of farm chores, Ben and Nick became inseparable. Ben's quiet nature soothed Nick's more rebellious streak. And as they grew, Nick's stubbornness lent Ben some backbone, much needed according to Caroline Pearce, who doted on Nick. If he hadn't liked Nick too much to feel jealous, Ben would have hated him on sight.

There'd come a time when he did hate Nick, he admitted, for hurting Jessie, and apparently there'd been no truce tonight. Ben couldn't blame her now for holding a grudge. Always so open and loving, Jessie'd had to learn to guard her heart, and Ben knew that her divorce hadn't helped. But she wouldn't even look at Nick.

Glancing across the dinner table, Ben sighed. He could only hope they reached dessert before Jessie fired one of Gran's crystal glasses at Nick's head. If only Beth were here ...

He sighed again. He wasn't the greatest conversationalist, and since they'd sat down to eat, nobody else had said a word. Taking the meat platter from Nick, Ben brought up the dark circles under Nick's eyes. "You're starting to look like a raccoon," he said. "Getting any sleep at all?"

"Not since Pop got sick." Nick buttered his peas. "And it's not just worry over him. His house is a mess, the barn looked like a pigsty when I got there, and his herd's too big. Every night when I drive back to the farm, they're waiting for me, standing hipslung in the corner of the fence by the top gate. Over a hundred of 'em, like a damn punishment." He reached for the bowl of potatoes. "Today I spent eight hours talking to doctors and trying to talk to Pop—as usual, he wouldn't listen—then raced back to milk. Poor damn cows, their udders were on the ground by the time I got there."

Ben grinned. "Sore udders once you finished with them."

"I never did have the touch," Nick agreed, "even just hooking 'em up to a machine."

"That's because you never practiced," Jessie said, addressing her plate. "You always made Ben do your milking, or me."

Nick tried to catch Jessie's gaze. "Yeah, whenever I could con you into it. How about six A.M. tomorrow?"

"A penny doesn't buy what it used to." She looked at her lap. "Or a killer smile. I'm not that gullible anymore."

Nick studied his meat loaf. "And maybe I'm not as selfish as I used to be," he said. "Right now all I am is tired, overworked, and strung out."

Ben wanted to squirm. Long ago, he and Gran had hoped that, despite the ten-year difference between them, Nick and Jessie would someday share their lives. Seeing them now, across the table from each other yet so far apart, made his throat ache. Dammit, if Beth were here, he wouldn't squander a minute. Shoving his milk aside, he reached for the wine. He'd wanted this dinner to be special.

"What will you do with the farm now?" Greg asked, breaking the silence.

"Wait, I guess," Nick said, "to see what happens with Pop."

Ben welcomed the change of topic. "I'm selling real estate on weekends," he said. "If you decide to list his place, let me know. I need the commission."

Greg's fork clattered onto his plate. "Mr. Granby won't sell. When he can talk, I bet the first words out of his mouth will be, 'Who's puttin' in my spring crop?'"

"Well, it won't be him," Nick murmured.

"It won't be you either," Ben said to Greg, who was getting up his foolish hopes again. He'd nip those in the bud. "When would you find the time? Your whole life's off track." He glanced at Nick. "My kid drops out of college after one semester, spends half the day sleeping when he should be looking for—"

"I am looking for a job."

"Doing what?" Ben asked.

Greg shrugged. "There isn't much around. Busing tables, pumping gas—but even the guy at the Mobil station said 'Come back next week.' I'm trying," he said, "but you know what I really want."

"A job on some farm?" Ben speared another slice of meat loaf. "How many times do I have to tell you? The small farmers are in the worst shape of anyone in this economy, and that's saying a lot. You're spinning dreams, Greg."

"At least I have them."

Nick cleared his throat. "Maybe you could come stay with me in Charleston. There's enough hurricane cleanup from last fall to go around. I'd be glad to add you to my crew at Seaview."

The luxury coastal resort, designed and built by Nick's firm, had sustained heavy damage, Ben knew, which reminded him that Nick not only had his father to worry about; he had his own business problems, too. The last thing he needed was a surly nineteen-year-old to look out for.

"Greg won't leave town," Ben said. "His afternoons are spoken for. You should see the piece of jailbait he's dating. Any job he gets will take second place to that twitching little miniskirt in the tight sweater." He saw Jessie's shocked expression and dared her with a look to say something. "Fifteen years old," he went on, "with a body like that—"

Jessie set her glass down. "Ben, for heaven's sake."

"Look, Dad—"

"Jailbait," Ben repeated. "The two of you alone in her house while her mother

works. I don't know what in hell's happened to families in this country." He scowled at his whipped potatoes. "God knows, you'd be better off pumping gas sixteen hours a day—I know it's too damn much to hope you'll go back to school—than risking whatever future you have left, and on what?"

"Heather's a nice girl."

Ben's eyebrows lifted. "I see more messed-up kids in my office every day than I care to admit. You think she hasn't been among them? Why Amy Stone can't stay home instead of playing professional woman at the historical society, or fix her schedule for her daughter's sake—"

"Amy Stone?" Jessie echoed. "Wasn't she in your class, Ben?"

He only grunted. She wasn't going to divert him now.

"Head cheerleader," Nick said and smiled faintly. "She had quite a figure herself—which never escaped your notice, Ben."

"Heather's mom was home today," Greg said, "but we were at the library. That's why I was late. Heather doesn't need a pass from your office to go to the public library, does she?" He paused. "I sure don't. I quit being the high school principal's kid at graduation."

"You could use a refresher course."

A heavy silence followed. Greg glared at the wall behind Ben's head. Jessie picked at her salad. "I think your father's just jealous," she said.

Nick chimed in. "I'll bet your girlfriend's terrific. Amy was an A student, in the top third of our class. Everybody liked her."

"Everyone likes Heather, too," Greg said.

Ben pushed his plate away. Even though, together, they'd tried to defuse the situation, Jessie still wouldn't look at Nick. Ben glared at his son. They quarreled more than they agreed these days. "Why can't you just take my advice? Stop worrying about that girl, and start worrying about your own life?"

Greg jumped to his feet. "You're just jealous of me with Heather 'cause you haven't been laid in a year!"

"Well, I wish I could say the same for you, goddammit—"

"Why can't you say what you really mean? What you feel, for a change? Why can't you admit, you miss Mom?" His eyes wounded, Greg clicked his glass on top of his plate and headed for the kitchen.

"Jesus, Ben," Nick said.

Ben's heart was racing. "Sorry."

"You used to have a sense of humor, some perspective with young people," Jessie said.

"Yeah, when I was a teenager myself." He felt sick. "I'm still a regular Bill Cosby at school. But my own kid"—Ben glanced toward the kitchen, where he could hear food being scraped into the garbage—"my own kid makes me crazy."

Jessie touched his hand to soften her words. "Don't you remember? 'Suspension of hostilities during mealtimes.'" It had been their grandmother's firm reminder whenever Jessie and Ben squabbled at the table.

Nick remembered, too. "Looks like this place could use a civilizing influence, Caroline Pearce style." His gaze snared Jessie's at last, but Ben looked away. "Aren't you glad your baby sister came home? I know I am."

Then Nick got up and carried his plate into the kitchen, leaving Ben with his guilt and Jessie, who looked equally pale and shaken. There had been no smashed crockery after all, he thought, no broken crystal.

Why don't you just admit, you miss Mom?

Ben pressed both hands to his eyes. No love, he added to himself.

An hour after dinner, in the dark, Jessie stood shivering on the back porch. She'd left Greg inside with Ben, and more angry words, but she soon realized there would be no escape. Nick had come after her.

"The sounds of battle," he said. Harsh male voices flooded outside with the spill of light from the house before he shut the door, trapping Jessie outside with him. Feeling embattled herself, she didn't respond. She glanced down at her ringless hands and felt Nick looking at them, too.

"I wanted to say that I'm sorry about your divorce." He shifted his weight. "I didn't know how to bring it up before. At dinner your brother . . ."

"I'm sorry about Tom," she said when he didn't continue.

"More battles," Nick murmured, then held out his down vest. "Here, take this. You'll catch a chill."

"If I take it, you'll catch one instead." She wanted him to leave her alone.

"Put it on." He slipped the vest around her shoulders and, in only his shirtsleeves, leaned against the porch railing, facing her. Nick folded his arms, drawing the shirt taut against his shoulders and biceps, which Jessie tried not to notice.

He regarded her solemnly. "You'd freeze to death before you willingly took anything from me, wouldn't you? Is that why you're out here? To keep away from me?"

"Actually, I was wondering whether I made the right decision, leaving Arizona." But he'd guessed the other reason, all right. "In Scottsdale the mercury was hovering in the nineties." She glanced at the splash of stars overhead. "Here, even the sky looks cold."

Jessie looked down in time to see Nick's features tighten. He knew she didn't mean the weather. "Dinner wasn't very pleasant, was it? Your brother's a hard case sometimes."

"He's worse since Beth died. Maybe I shouldn't intrude on his privacy now." And you shouldn't intrude on mine, she thought.

"Ben reminds me of Pop and the years at the farm when all I wanted was to get out."

"Well, you did," she said. "Are you happy in Charleston?"

Nick was frowning, as if he knew he'd said the wrong thing too late to take it back. "Away from Carran, you mean? Sure, it's a great city. Gracious, beautiful, well-mannered."

"Like a fine southern lady," Jessie said, ignoring the edge in his tone.

"It has a different tempo, a gentler one. And yet, since last September's hurricane, there's been a new air of excitement." He shrugged. "But I didn't come out here to discuss Charleston, I—"

"How did your property survive the storm?" Inching away from him, as she'd been doing since he'd stepped onto the porch, Jessie retreated to its far end, twining one

arm around a sturdy post to anchor herself.

"The biggest tree in my garden went through my roof," he said, "but the attic's been fixed. The mud in my oriental carpet has been lifted out, so I'd say things are back to normal.

"Other people weren't so lucky," Nick continued. "We had more than thirty-six thousand homes destroyed or severely damaged. My construction foreman's new house got knocked clear off its foundation, and that wasn't unique by any means."

Jessie's tone was dry. "All those homes lost must mean business is booming." Business, and Nick's profits.

"More or less. But let's not get into a gloomy rehash of my liabilities versus assets." His dark eyes looked troubled. "Granby Design's been the top firm in Charleston for three years running. I own a house the local bluebloods would kill for. But the banks still have a problem with Yankee carpetbaggers, and as far as they're concerned, I'm still from up north." He gave the word a soft southern drawl that made Jessie want to smile in spite of herself.

"Don't they know the Civil War has ended?"

"No more than anywhere else south of Philadelphia." His frown faded. "Of course you have to understand. Down there, belonging's a matter of birth. The story's told of a man whose family had moved to Charleston when he was three days old. He lived there all his life. Married well. Made money. Pillar of the community et cetera. Finally, when he was well into his nineties, he died and was buried—with all due respect and ceremony—in the cemetery still reserved for 'outsiders.' "

Jessie gave in to the grin.

"Seriously," Nick went on. "It's across the street from where they bury the 'natives,' those who were actually born in Charleston."

"What if you married a local aristocrat?"

His answering grin flashed white in the darkness. "We'd end up on opposite sides of the street in eternal rest."

Jessie relaxed her grip on the porch post. He'd always told a good story, not that Nick had won her over now, she thought—and in that instant saw grim determination overtake his grin.

"Enough stories," he said, taking a step toward her. "I didn't come out here to talk about South Carolina, or your ex-husband or Pop. I want to talk—"

"About what?" She couldn't retreat any farther but refused to shrink into the porch corner like a seventeen-year-old virgin.

"About everything else," he said, then stopped walking as if he sensed her withdrawal. "Your books, for one. I've read them both. They're great. You don't know how many times I almost wrote to say how proud I was."

Jessie flinched. Above all, she didn't want to talk about her work. "But you didn't write," she said.

"You hadn't exactly accepted my apology for the last time I saw you. You wouldn't take my calls or answer my letters."

"There was nothing more to say."

"Then you married Peter, and were living another life, far away. It didn't seem right to dredge things up."

"Then let's not dredge them up now."

She hadn't seen him move again. He stood only a foot away, his nearness reminding her of a warmer spring night, smelling of apple blossoms, the chorus of spring peepers singing near Gran's pond, the rustle of fabric, the taste of his mouth ... so long ago.

"Twelve years," she said.

"A long time," Nick agreed. "Are you going to hold that night against me for another twelve years? Hell, I made a mistake." He gestured toward the house and the rumble of voices inside. "Who doesn't? Your own brother with Greg tonight—"

"You're right." She'd been a mistake. "We all make mistakes."

"Well, I've paid for mine," he said. "Dammit, I have, Jess."

And with that one word, tears welled in her eyes, and she lost the battle. No one had ever called her Jess, except Nick.

"Oh, Nicholas," she whispered past the tightness in her throat. It had been her grandmother's endearment, usually in exasperation. Pushing away from the porch corner, Jessie started for the kitchen door with Nick at her heels. Such an escape was a childish gesture, she knew, and cowardly, and she shouldn't run; but her footsteps hurried faster.

Since her divorce, she'd felt shattered. She'd come to Ben's to rest, to put her life together, to work if she could; after publishing two successful novels, and despite a contract deadline in six months, she couldn't seem to write a third. Not a chapter, not even a line worth putting on paper since she'd left Peter.

How did life get so convoluted? How, Jessie wondered, when she'd wanted such simple things, ordinary things: a good marriage, children, her career going well. Now she slammed into her brother's kitchen, her heart thumping in panic, with Nick right behind her.

"Jess, don't hate me."

Not so simple at that, she realized. She had wanted it all. Perhaps the real problem was that she'd stopped believing in happy endings, and, seeing Nick again, had just been reminded of that.

She hadn't wanted to see him. Now that she had, she'd have to avoid him. When he called her name again, Jessie kept moving, through Ben's kitchen, his dining and living rooms, and upstairs to bed. She knew she wouldn't sleep, but she also feared the novelist had been right when he said you can't go home again.

Or had she simply come to the wrong place?