

FIVE

THE ferry steamed across Pelican Sound, heading east to Lost Desire. Nathan Delaney stood at the starboard rail as he had once before as a ten-year-old boy. It wasn't the same ferry, and he was no longer a boy, but he wanted to re-create the moment as closely as possible.

It was cool with the breeze off the water, and the scent of it was raw and mysterious. It had been warmer before, but then it had been late May rather than mid-April.

Close enough, he thought, remembering how he and his parents and his young brother had all crowded together at the starboard rail of another ferry, eager for their first glimpse of Desire and the start of their island summer.

He could see little difference. Spearing up from the land were the majestic live oaks with their lacy moss, cabbage palms, and glossy-leaved magnolias not yet in bloom.

Had they been blooming then? A young boy eager for adventure paid little attention to flowers.

He lifted the binoculars that hung around his neck. His father had helped him aim and focus on that long-ago morning so that he could catch the quick dart of a woodpecker. The expected tussle had followed because Kyle had demanded the binoculars and Nathan hadn't wanted to give them up.

He remembered his mother laughing at them, and his father bending down to tickle Kyle to distract him. In his mind, Nathan could see the picture they had made. The pretty woman with her hair blowing, her dark eyes sparkling with amusement and excitement. The two young boys, sturdy and scrubbed, squabbling. And the man, tall and dark, long of leg and rangy of build.

Now, Nathan thought, he was the only one left. Somehow he had grown up into his father's body, had gone from sturdy boy to a man with long legs and narrow hips. He could look in a mirror and see reflections of his father's face in the hollow cheeks and dark gray eyes. But he had his mother's mouth, firmly ridged, and her deep brown hair with hints of gold and red. His father had said it was like aged mahogany.

Nathan wondered if children were really just montages of their parents. And he shuddered.

Without the binoculars he watched the island take shape. He could see the wash of color from wildflowers—pinks and violets from lupine and wood sorrel. A scatter of houses was visible, a few straight or winding roads, the flash of a creek that disappeared into the trees. Mystery was added by the dark shadows of the forest where feral pigs and horses had once lived, the gleam of the marshes and the blades of waving grasses gold and green in the streaming morning sunlight.

It was all hazed with distance, like a dream.

Then he saw the gleam of white on a rise, the quick wink that was sun shooting off glass. Sanctuary, he thought, and kept it in his sights until the ferry turned toward the dock and the house was lost from view.

Nathan turned from the rail and walked back to his Jeep. When he was settled inside with only the hum of the ferry's engines for company, he wondered if he was crazy coming back here, exploring the past, in some ways repeating it.

He'd left New York, packed everything that mattered into the



Jeep. It was surprisingly little. Then again, he'd never had a deep-seated need for things. That had made his life simpler through the divorce two years before. Maureen had been the collector, and it saved them both a great deal of time and temper when he offered to let her strip the West Side apartment.

Christ knew she'd taken him up on it and had left him with little more than his own clothes and a mattress.

That chapter of his life was over, and for nearly two years now he'd devoted himself to his work. Designing buildings was as much a passion as a career for him, and with New York as no more than a home base, he had traveled, studying sites, working wherever he could set up his drawing board and computer. He'd given himself the gift of time to study other buildings, explore the art of them, from the great cathedrals in Italy and France to the streamlined desert homes in the American Southwest.

He'd been free, his work the only demand on his time and on his heart.

Then he had lost his parents, suddenly, irrevocably. And had lost himself. He wondered why he felt he could find the pieces on Desire.

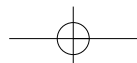
But he was committed to staying at least six months. Nathan took it as a good sign that he'd been able to book the same cottage his family had lived in during that summer. He knew he would listen for the echo of their voices and would hear them with a man's ear. He would see their ghosts with a man's eyes.

And he would return to Sanctuary with a man's purpose.

Would they remember him? The children of Annabelle?

He would soon find out, he decided, when the ferry bumped up to the dock.

He waited his turn, watching as the blocks were removed from the tires of the pickup ahead of him. A family of five, he noted, and from the gear he could see that they would be camping at the





facility the island provided. Nathan shook his head, wondering why anyone would choose to sleep in a tent on the ground and consider it a vacation.

The light dimmed as clouds rolled over the sun. Frowning, he noted that they were coming in fast, flying in from the east. Rain could come quickly to barrier islands, he knew. He remembered it falling in torrents for three endless days when he'd been there before. By day two he and Kyle had been at each other's throats like young wolves.

It made him smile now and wonder how in God's name his mother had tolerated it.

He drove slowly off the ferry, then up the bumpy, pitted road leading away from the dock. With his windows open he could hear the cheerfully blaring rock and roll screaming out of the truck's radio. Camper Family, he thought, was already having a great time, impending rain or not. He was determined to follow their example and enjoy the morning.

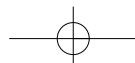
He would have to face Sanctuary, of course, but he would approach it as an architect. He remembered that its heart was a glorious example of the Colonial style—wide verandas, stately columns, tall, narrow windows. Even as a child he'd been interested enough to note some of the details.

Gargoyle rainspouts, he recalled, that personalized rather than detracted from the grand style. He'd scared the piss out of Kyle by telling him they came alive at night and prowled.

There was a turret, with a widow's walk circling it. Balconies jutting out with ornate railings of stone or iron. The chimneys were soft-hued stones mined from the mainland, the house itself fashioned of local cypress and oak.

There was a smokehouse that had still been in use, and slave quarters that had been falling to ruin, where he and Brian and Kyle had found a rattler curled in a dark corner.

There were deer in the forest and alligators in the marshes. Whispers of pirates and ghosts filled the air. It was a fine place for





young boys and grand adventures. And for dark and dangerous secrets.

He passed the western marshlands with their busy mud and thin islands of trees. The wind had picked up, sending the cord-grass rippling. Along the edge two egrets were on patrol, their long legs like stilts in the shallow water.

Then the forest took over, lush and exotic. Nathan slowed, letting the truck ahead of him rattle out of sight. Here was stillness, and those dark secrets. His heart began to pound uncomfortably, and his hands tightened on the wheel. This was something he'd come to face, to dissect, and eventually to understand.

The shadows were thick, and the moss dripped from the trees like webs of monstrous spiders. To test himself he turned off the engine. He could hear nothing but his own heartbeat and the voice of the wind.

Ghosts, he thought. He would have to look for them there. And when he found them, what then? Would he leave them where they drifted, night after night, or would they continue to haunt him, muttering to him in his sleep?

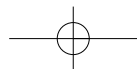
Would he see his mother's face, or Annabelle's? And which one would cry out the loudest?

He let out a long breath, caught himself reaching for the cigarettes he'd given up over a year before. Annoyed, he turned the ignition key but got only a straining rumble in return. He pumped the gas, tried it again with the same results.

"Well, shit," he muttered. "That's perfect."

Sitting back, he tapped his fingers restlessly on the wheel. The thing to do, of course, was to get out and look under the hood. He knew what he would see. An engine. Wires and tubes and belts. Nathan figured he knew as much about engines and wires and tubes as he did about brain surgery. And being broken down on a deserted road was exactly what he deserved for letting himself be talked into buying a friend's secondhand Jeep.

Resigned, he climbed out and popped the hood. Yep, he





thought, just as he'd suspected. An engine. He leaned in, poked at it, and felt the first fat drop of rain hit his back.

"Now it's even more perfect." He shoved his hands in the front pockets of his jeans and scowled, continued to scowl while the rain pattered on his head.

He should have known something was up when his friend had cheerfully tossed in a box of tools along with the Jeep. Nathan considered hauling them out and beating on the engine with a wrench. It was unlikely to work, but it would at least be satisfying.

He stepped back, then froze as the ghost stepped out of the forest shadows and watched him.

Annabelle.

The name swam through his mind, and his gut clenched in defense. She stood in the rain, still as a doe, her smoky red hair damp and tangled, those big blue eyes quiet and sad. His knees threatened to give way, and he braced a hand on the fender.

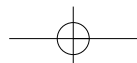
Then she moved, pushed back her wet hair. And started toward him. He saw then that it was no ghost, but a woman. It was not Annabelle, but, he was sure, it was Annabelle's daughter.

He let out the breath he'd been holding until his heart settled again.

"Car trouble?" Jo tried to keep her voice light. The way he was staring at her made her wish she'd stayed in the trees and let him fend for himself. "I take it you're not standing here in the rain taking in the sights."

"No." It pleased him that his voice was normal. If there was an edge to it, the situation was cause enough to explain it. "It won't start."

"Well, that's a problem." He looked vaguely familiar, she thought. A good face, strong and bony and male. Interesting eyes as well, she mused, pure gray and very direct. If she were inclined to portrait photography, he'd have been a fine subject. "Did you find the trouble?"





Her voice was honey over cream, gorgeously southern. It helped him relax. "I found the engine," he said and smiled. "Just where I suspected it would be."

"Uh-huh. And now?"

"I'm deciding how long I should look at it and pretend I know what I'm looking at before I get back in out of the rain."

"You don't know how to fix your car?" she asked, with such obvious surprise that he bristled.

"No, I don't. I also own shoes and don't have a clue how to tan leather." He started to yank down the hood, but she raised a hand to hold it open.

"I'll take a look."

"What are you, a mechanic?"

"No, but I know the basics." Elbowing him aside, she checked the battery connections first. "These look all right, but you're going to want to keep an eye on them for corrosion if you're spending any time on Desire."

"Six months or so." He leaned in with her. "What am I keeping my eye on?"

"These. Moisture can play hell with engines around here. You're crowding me."

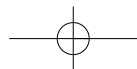
"Sorry." He shifted his position. Obviously she didn't remember him, and he decided to pretend he didn't remember her. "You live on the island?"

"Not anymore." To keep from bumping it on the Jeep, Jo moved the camera slung around her neck to her back.

Nate stared at it, felt the low jolt. It was a high-end Nikon. Compact, quieter and more rugged than other designs, it was often a professional's choice. His father had had one. He had one himself.

"Been out taking pictures in the rain?"

"Wasn't raining when I left," she said absently. "Your fan belt's going to need replacing before long, but that's not your problem now." She straightened, and though the skies had opened wide,





seemed oblivious to the downpour. “Get in and try it so I can hear what she sounds like.”

“You’re the boss.”

Her lips twitched as he turned and climbed back into the Jeep. No doubt his male ego was dented, she decided. She cocked her head as the engine groaned. Lips pursed, she leaned back under the hood. “Again!” she called out to him, muttering to herself. “Carburetor.”

“What?”

“Carburetor,” she repeated and opened the little metal door with her thumb. “Turn her over again.”

This time the engine roared to life. With a satisfied nod, she shut the hood and walked around to the driver’s side window. “It’s sticking closed, that’s all. You’re going to want to have it looked at. From the sound of it, you need a tune-up anyway. When’s the last time you had it in?”

“I just bought it a couple of weeks ago. From a former friend.”

“Ah. Always a mistake. Well, it should get you where you’re going now.”

When she started to step back, he reached through the window for her hand. It was narrow, he noted, long, both elegant and competent. “Listen, let me give you a lift. It’s pouring, and it’s the least I can do.”

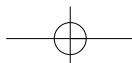
“It’s not necessary. I can—”

“I could break down again.” He shot her a smile, charming, easy, persuasive. “Who’ll fix my carburetor?”

It was foolish to refuse, she knew. More foolish to feel trapped just because he had her hand. She shrugged. “All right, then.” She gave her hand a little tug, was relieved when he immediately released it. She jogged around the Jeep and climbed dripping into the passenger seat.

“Well, the interior’s in good shape.”

“My former friend knows me too well.” Nathan turned on the wipers and looked at Jo. “Where to?”



“Up this road, then bear right at the first fork. Sanctuary isn’t far—but then nothing is on Desire.”

“That’s handy. I’m heading to Sanctuary myself.”

“Oh?” The air in the cab was thick and heavy. The driving rain seemed to cut them off from everything, misting out the trees, muffling all the sound. Reason enough to be uncomfortable, she told herself, but she was sufficiently annoyed with her reaction to angle her head and meet his eyes directly. “Are you staying at the big house?”

“No, just picking up keys for the cottage I’m renting.”

“For six months, you said?” It relieved her when he began to drive, turned those intense gray eyes away from her face and focused on the road. “That’s a long vacation.”

“I brought work with me. I wanted a change of scene for a while.”

“Desire’s a long way from home,” she said, then smiled a little when he glanced at her. “Anyone from Georgia can spot a Yankee. Even if you keep your mouth shut, you move differently.” She pushed her wet hair back. If she’d walked, Jo thought, she’d have been spared making conversation. But talk was better than the heavy, rain-drenched silence. “You’ve got Little Desire Cottage, by the river.”

“How do you know?”

“Oh, everybody knows everything around here. But my family rents the cottages, runs them and the inn, the restaurant. As it happens I was assigned Little Desire, stocked the linens and so forth just yesterday for the Yankee who’s coming to stay for six months.”

“So you’re my mechanic, landlord, and housekeeper. I’m a lucky man. Who exactly do I call if my sink backs up?”

“You open the closet and take out the plunger. If you need instructions for use, I’ll write them down for you. Here’s the fork.”

Nathan bore right and climbed. “Let’s try that again. If I



wanted to grill a couple of steaks, chill a bottle of wine, and invite you to dinner, who would I call?"

Jo turned her head and gave him a cool look. "You'd have better luck with my sister. Her name is Alexa."

"Does she fix carburetors?"

With a half laugh, Jo shook her head. "No, but she's very decorative and enjoys invitations from men."

"And you don't?"

"Let's just say I'm more selective than Lexy."

"Ouch." Whistling, Nathan rubbed a hand over his heart. "Di-rect hit."

"Just saving us both some time. There's Sanctuary," she murmured.

He watched it appear through the curtain of rain, swim out of the thin mists that curled at its base. It was old and grand, as elegant as a Southern Belle dressed for company. Definitely feminine, Nate thought, with those fluid lines all in virginal white. Tall windows were softened by arched trim, and pretty ironwork adorned balconies where flowers bloomed out of clay pots of soft red.

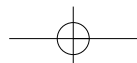
Her gardens glowed, the blooms heavy-headed with rain, like bowing fairies at her feet.

"Stunning," Nathan said, half to himself. "The more recent additions blend perfectly with the original structure. Accent rather than modernize. It's a masterful harmony of styles, classically southern without being typical. It couldn't be more perfect if the island had been designed for it rather than it being designed for the island."

Nathan stopped at the end of the drive before he noticed that Jo was staring at him. For the first time there was curiosity in her eyes.

"I'm an architect," he explained. "Buildings like this grab me right by the throat."

"Well, then, you'll probably want a tour of the inside."





“I’d love one, and I’d owe you at least one steak dinner for that.”

“You’ll want my cousin Kate to show you around. She’s a Pendleton,” Jo added as she opened her door. “Sanctuary came down through the Pendletons. She knows it best. Come inside. You can dry off some and pick up the keys.”

She hurried up the steps, paused on the veranda to shake her head and scatter rain from her hair. She waited until he stepped up beside her.

“Jesus, look at this door.” Reverently, Nathan ran his fingertips over the rich, carved wood. Odd that he’d forgotten it, he thought. But then, he had usually raced in through the screened porch and through the kitchen.

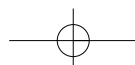
“Honduran mahogany,” Jo told him. “Imported in the early eighteen-hundreds, long before anyone worried about depleting the rain forests. But it is beautiful.” She turned the heavy brass handle and stepped with him into Sanctuary.

“The floors are heart of pine,” she began and blocked out an unbidden image of her mother patiently paste-waxing them. “As are the main stairs, and the banister is oak carved and constructed here on Desire when it was a plantation, dealing mostly in Sea Island cotton. The chandelier is more recent, an addition purchased in France by the wife of Stewart Pendleton, the shipping tycoon who rebuilt the main house and added the wings. A great deal of the furniture was lost during the War Between the States, but Stewart and his wife traveled extensively and selected antiques that suited them and Sanctuary.”

“He had a good eye,” Nathan commented, scanning the wide, high-ceilinged foyer with its fluid sweep of glossy stairs, its glittering fountain of crystal light.

“And a deep pocket,” Jo put in. Telling herself to be patient, she stood where she was and let him wander.

The walls were a soft, pale yellow that would give the illusion of cool during those viciously hot summer afternoons. They were



trimmed in dark wood that added richness with carved moldings framing the high plaster ceiling.

The furnishings here were heavy and large in scale, as befitted a grand entranceway. A pair of George II armchairs with shell-shaped backs flanked a hexagonal credence table that held a towering brass urn filled with sweetly scented lilies and wild grasses.

Though he didn't collect antiques himself—or anything else, for that matter—he was a man who studied all aspects of buildings, including what went inside them. He recognized the Flemish cabinet-on-stand in carved oak, the giltwood pier mirror over a marquetry candle stand, the delicacy of Queen Anne and the flash of Louis XIV. And he found the mix of periods and styles inspired.

“Incredible.” His hands tucked in his back pockets, he turned back to Jo. “Hell of a place to live, I'd say.”

“In more ways than one.” Her voice was dry, and just a little bitter. It had him lifting a brow in question, but she added nothing more. “We do registration in the front parlor.”

She turned down the hallway, stepped into the first room on the right. Someone had started a fire, she observed, probably in anticipation of the Yankee, and to keep the guests at the inn cheerful on a rainy day if they wandered through.

She went to the huge old Chippendale writing desk and opened the top side drawer, flipped through the paperwork for the rental cottages. Upstairs in the family wing was an office with a workaday file cabinet and a computer Kate was still struggling to learn about. But guests were never subjected to such drearily ordinary details.

“Little Desire Cottage,” Jo announced, sliding the contract free. She noted it had already been stamped to indicate receipt of the deposit and signed by both Kate and one Nathan Delaney.

Jo laid the paperwork aside and opened another drawer to take out the keys jingling from a metal clip that held the cottage



name. “This one is for both the front and the rear doors, and the smaller one is for the storage room under the cottage. I wouldn’t store anything important in there if I were you. Flooding is a hazard that near the river.”

“I’ll remember that.”

“I took care of setting up the telephone yesterday. All calls will be billed directly to the cottage and added to your bill monthly.” She opened another drawer and took out a slim folder. “You’ll find the usual information and answers in this packet. The ferry schedule, tide information, how to rent fishing or boating gear if you want it. There’s a pamphlet that describes the island—history, flora and fauna— Why are you staring at me like that?” she demanded.

“You’ve got gorgeous eyes. It’s hard not to look at them.”

She shoved the folder into his hands. “You’d be better off looking at what’s in here.”

“All right.” Nathan opened it, began to page through. “Are you always this jittery, or do I bring that out in you?”

“I’m not jittery, I’m impatient. Not all of us are on vacation. Do you have any questions—that pertain to the cottage or the island?”

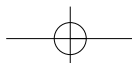
“I’ll let you know.”

“Directions to your cottage are in the folder. If you’d just initial the contract here, to confirm receipt of the keys and information, you can be on your way.”

He smiled again, intrigued at how rapidly her southern hospitality was thinning. “I wouldn’t want to wear out my welcome,” he said, taking the pen she offered him. “Since I intend to come back.”

“Breakfast, lunch, and dinner are served in the inn’s dining room. The service hours are also listed in your folder. Box lunches are available for picnics.”

The more she talked, the more he enjoyed hearing her voice. She smelled of rain and nothing else and looked—when you



looked into those lovely blue eyes—as sad as a bird with a broken wing.

“Do you like picnics?” he asked her.

She let out a long sigh, snatched the pen back from him, and scrawled her initials under his. “You’re wasting your time flirting with me, Mr. Delaney. I’m just not interested.”

“Any sensible woman knows that a statement like that only presents a challenge.” He bent down to read her initials, “J.E.H.”

“Jo Ellen Hathaway,” she told him in hopes of hurrying him along.

“It’s been a pleasure being rescued by you, Jo Ellen.” He offered a hand, amused when she hesitated before clasping it with hers.

“Try Zeke Fitzsimmons about that tune-up. He’ll get the Jeep running smoothly for you. Enjoy your stay on Desire.”

“It’s already started on a higher note than I’d expected.”

“Then your expectations must have been very low.” She slid her hand free and led the way back to the front door. “The rain’s let up,” she commented, as she opened the door to moist air and mist. “You shouldn’t have any trouble finding the cottage.”

“No.” He remembered the way perfectly. “I’m sure I won’t. I’ll see you again, Jo Ellen.” Will have to, he thought, for a number of reasons.

She inclined her head, shut the door quietly, and left him standing on the veranda wondering what to do next.