

## SIX

ON his third day on Desire, Nathan woke in a panic. His heart was booming, his breath short and strangled, his skin iced with sweat. He shot up in bed with fists clenched, his eyes searching the murky shadows of the room.

Weak sunlight filtered through the slats of the blinds and built a cage on the thin gray carpet.

His mind stayed blank for an agonizing moment, trapped behind the images that crowded it. Moonlit trees, fingers of fog, a woman's naked body, her fanning dark hair, wide, glassy eyes.

Ghosts, he told himself as he rubbed his face hard with his hands. He'd expected them, and they hadn't disappointed him. They clung to Desire like the moss clung to the live oaks.

He swung out of bed and deliberately—like a child daring sidewalk cracks—walked through the sun bars. In the narrow bathroom he stepped into the white tub, yanked the cheerfully striped curtain closed, and ran the shower hot. He washed the sweat away, imagined the panic as a dark red haze that circled and slid down the drain.

The room was thick with steam when he dried off. But his mind was clear again.

He dressed in a tattered short-sleeved sweatshirt and ancient gym shorts, then with his face unshaven and his hair dripping

headed into the kitchen to heat water for instant coffee. He looked around, scowled again at the carafe and drip cone the owners had provided. Even if he could have figured out the proper measuring formula, he hadn't thought to bring coffee filters.

At that moment he would have paid a thousand dollars for a coffeemaker. He set the kettle on the front burner of a stove that was older than he was, then walked over to the living room section of the large multipurpose room to flip on the early news. The reception was miserable, and the pickings slim.

No coffeemaker, no pay-per-view, Nathan mused as he tuned in the sunrise news on one of the three available channels. He remembered how he and Kyle had whined over the lack of televised entertainment.

*How are we supposed to watch The Six Million Dollar Man on this stupid thing? It's a gyp.*

*You're not here to keep your noses glued to the TV screen.*

*Am, Mom.*

It seemed to him the color scheme was different now. He had a vague recollection of soft pastels on the wide, deep chairs and straight-backed sofa. Now they were covered in bold geometric prints, deep greens and blues, sunny yellows.

The fan that dropped from the center pitch of the ceiling had squeaked. He knew, because he'd been compelled to tug on the cord, that it ran now with only a quiet hiss of blades.

But it was the same long yellow-pine dining table separating the rooms—the table he and his family had gathered around to eat, to play board games, to put together eye-crossingly complex jigsaw puzzles during that summer.

The same table he and Kyle had been assigned to clear after dinner. The table where his father had lingered some mornings over coffee.

He remembered when their father had shown him and Kyle how to punch holes in the lid of a jar and catch lightning bugs.



The evening had been warm and soft, the hunt and chase giddy. Nathan remembered watching the jar he'd put beside his bed wink and glow, wink and glow, lulling him to sleep.

But in the morning all the lightning bugs in his jar had been dead, smothered, as the book atop the lid had plugged all the holes. He still couldn't remember putting it there, that battered copy of *Johnny Tremain*. The dark corpses in the bottom of the jar had left him feeling sick and guilty. He'd snuck out of the house and dumped them in the river.

He chased no more lightning bugs that summer.

Irritated at the memory, Nathan turned away from the TV, went back to the stove to pour the steaming water over a spoonful of coffee. He carried the mug out onto the screened porch to look at the river.

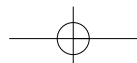
Memories were bound to surface now that he was here, he reminded himself. That was why he'd come. To remember that summer, step by step, day by day. And to figure out what to do about the Hathaways.

He sipped coffee, winced a little at its false and bitter taste. He'd discovered that a great deal of life was false and bitter, so he drank again.

Jo Ellen Hathaway. He remembered her as a skinny, sharp-elbowed girl with a sloppy ponytail and a lightning temper. He hadn't had much use for girls at ten, so he'd paid her little attention. She'd simply been one of Brian's little sisters.

Still was, Nathan thought. And she was still skinny. Apparently her temper was still in place as well. The streaming ponytail was gone. The shorter, choppy cut suited her personality if not her face, he decided. The carelessness of it, the nod to fashion. The color of it was like the pelt of a wild deer.

He wondered why she looked so pale and tired. She didn't seem the type to pine away over a shattered affair or relationship, but something was hurting. Her eyes were full of sorrow and secrets.





And that was the problem, Nathan thought with a half laugh. He had a weakness for sad-eyed women.

Better to resist it, he told himself. Wondering what was going on behind those big, sad, bluebell eyes was bound to interfere with his purpose. What he needed was time and objectivity before he took the next step.

He sipped more coffee, told himself he'd get dressed shortly and walk to Sanctuary for a decent cup and some breakfast. It was time to go back, to observe and to plan. Time to stir more ghosts.

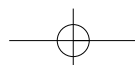
But for now he just wanted to stand here, look through the thin mesh of screen, feel the damp air, watch the sun slowly burn away the pearly mists that clung to the ground and skimmed like fairy wings over the river.

He could hear the ocean if he listened for it, a low, constant rumble off to the east. Closer he could identify the chirp of birds, the monotonous drumming of a woodpecker hunting insects somewhere in the shadows of the forest. Dew glistened like shards of glass on the leaves of cabbage palms and palmettos, and there was no wind to stir them and make them rattle.

Whoever chose this spot for the cottage chose well, he thought. It sang of solitude, offered view and privacy. The structure itself was simple and functional. A weathered cedar box on stilts with a generous screened porch on the west end, a narrow open deck on the east. Inside, the main room had a pitched ceiling to add space and an open feel. On each end were two bedrooms and a bath.

He and Kyle had each had a room in one half. As the elder, he laid claim to the larger room. The double bed made him feel very grown-up and superior. He made a sign for the door: Please Knock Before Entering.

He liked to stay up late, reading his books, thinking his thoughts, listening to the murmur of his parents' voices or the drone of the TV. He liked to hear them laugh at something they were watching.





His mother's quick chuckle, his father's deep belly laugh. He'd heard those sounds often throughout his childhood. It grieved him that he would never hear them again.

A movement caught his eye. Nathan turned his head, and where he'd expected a deer he saw a man, slipping along the river bank like the mist. He was tall and lanky, his hair dark as soot.

Because his throat had gone dry, Nathan forced himself to lift his mug and drink again. He continued to watch as the man walked closer, as the strengthening sun slanted over his face.

Not Sam Hathaway, Nathan realized as the beginnings of a smile tugged at his lips. Brian. Twenty years had made them both men.

Brian glanced up, squinted, focused on the figure behind the screen. He'd forgotten the cottage was occupied now and made a note to himself to remember to take his walks on the opposite side of the river. Now, he supposed, he would have to make some attempt at conversation.

He lifted a hand. "Morning. Didn't mean to disturb you."

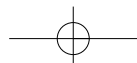
"You didn't. I was just drinking bad coffee and watching the river."

The Yankee, Brian remembered, a six-month rental. He could all but hear Kate telling him to be polite, to be sociable. "It's a nice spot." Brian stuck his hands in his pockets, annoyed that he'd inadvertently sabotaged his own solitude. "You settling in all right?"

"Yeah, I'm settled." Nathan hesitated, then took the next step. "Are you still hunting the Ghost Stallion?"

Brian blinked, cocked his head. The Ghost Stallion was a legend that stretched back to the days when wild horses had roamed the island. It was said that the greatest of these, a huge black stallion of unparalleled speed, ran the woods. Whoever caught him, leaped onto his back, and rode would have all his wishes granted.

Throughout childhood it had been Brian's deepest ambition to be the one to catch and ride the Ghost Stallion.





“I keep an eye out for him,” Brian murmured and stepped closer. “Do I know you?”

“We camped out one night, across the river, in a patched pup tent. We had a rope halter, a couple of flashlights, and a bag of Fritos. Once we thought we heard hooves pounding, and a high, wild whinny.” Nathan smiled. “Maybe we did.”

Brian’s eyes widened and the shadows in them cleared away. “Nate? Nate Delaney? Son of a bitch!”

The screen door squeaked in welcome when Nathan pushed it open. “Come on up, Bri. I’ll fix you a cup of lousy coffee.”

Grinning, Brian climbed up the stairs. “You should have let me know you were coming, that you were here.” Brian shot out a hand, gripped Nathan’s. “My cousin Kate handles the cottages. Jesus, Nate, you look like a derelict.”

With a rueful smile, Nathan rubbed a hand over the stubble on his chin. “I’m on vacation.”

“Well, ain’t this a kick in the ass. Nate Delaney.” Brian shook his head. “What the hell have you been doing all these years? How’s Kyle, your parents?”

The smile faltered. “I’ll tell you about it.” Pieces of it, Nathan thought. “Let me make that lousy coffee first.”

“Hell, no. Come on up to the house. I’ll fix you a decent cup. Some breakfast.”

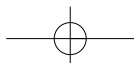
“All right. Let me get some pants and shoes on.”

“I can’t believe you’re our Yankee,” Brian commented as Nathan started inside. “Goddamn, this takes me back.”

Nathan turned back briefly. “Yeah, me too.”

A short time later Nathan was sitting at the kitchen counter of Sanctuary, breathing in the heavenly scents of coffee brewing and bacon frying. He watched Brian deftly chopping mushrooms and peppers for an omelette.

“Looks like you know what you’re doing.”





“Didn’t you read your pamphlet? My kitchen has a five-star rating.” Brian slid a mug of coffee under Nathan’s nose. “Drink, then grovel.”

Nathan sipped, closed his eyes in grateful pleasure. “I’ve been drinking sand for the last two days and that may be influencing me, but I’d say this is the best cup of coffee ever brewed in the civilized world.”

“Damn right it is. Why haven’t you come up before this?”

“I’ve been getting my bearings, being lazy.” Getting acquainted with ghosts, Nathan thought. “Now that I’ve sampled this, I’ll be a regular.”

Brian tossed his chopped vegetables into a skillet to sauté, then began grating cheese. “Wait till you get a load of my omelette. So what are you, independently wealthy that you can take six months off to sit on the beach?”

“I brought work with me. I’m an architect. As long as I have my computer and my drawing board, I can work anywhere.”

“An architect.” Whisking eggs, Brian leaned against the counter. “You any good?”

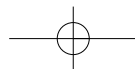
“I’d put my buildings against your coffee any day.”

“Well, then.” Chuckling, Brian turned back to the stove. With the ease of experience he poured the egg mixture, set bacon to drain, checked the biscuits he had browning in the oven. “So what’s Kyle up to? He ever get rich and famous like he wanted?”

It was a stab, hard and fast in the center of the heart. Nathan put the mug down and waited for his hands and voice to steady. “He was working on it. He’s dead, Brian. He died a couple of months ago.”

“Jesus, Nathan.” Shocked, Brian swung around. “Jesus, I’m sorry.”

“He was in Europe. He’d been more or less living there the last couple of years. He was on a yacht, some party. Kyle liked to party,” Nathan murmured, rubbing his temple. “They were tooling around the Med. The verdict was he must have had too





much to drink and fallen overboard. Maybe he hit his head. But he was gone.”

“That’s rough. I’m sorry.” Brian turned back to his skillet. “Losing family takes a chunk out of you.”

“Yeah, it does.” Nathan drew a deep breath, braced himself. “It happened just a few weeks after my parents were killed. Train wreck in South America. Dad was on assignment, and ever since Kyle and I hit college age, Mom traveled with him. She used to say it made them feel like newlyweds all the time.”

“Christ, Nate, I don’t know what to say.”

“Nothing.” Nathan lifted his shoulders. “You get through. I figure Mom would have been lost without Dad, and I don’t know how either one of them would have handled losing Kyle. You’ve got to figure everything happens for a reason, and you get through.”

“Sometimes the reason stinks,” Brian said quietly.

“A whole hell of a lot of the time the reason stinks. Doesn’t change anything. It’s good to be back here. It’s good to see you.”

“We had some fine times that summer.”

“Some of the best of my life.” Nathan worked up a smile. “Are you going to give me that omelette, or are you going to make me beg for it?”

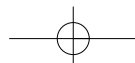
“No begging necessary.” Brian arranged the food on a plate. “Genuflecting afterward is encouraged.”

Nathan picked up a fork and dug in. “So, fill me in on the last two decades of the adventures of Brian Hathaway.”

“Not much of an adventure. Running the inn takes a lot of time. We get guests year-round now. Seems the more crowded and busy life in the outside world gets, the more people want to get the hell away from it. For weekends, anyhow. And when they do, we house them, feed them, entertain them.”

“It sounds like a twenty-four/seven proposition.”

“Would be, on the outside. Life still moves slower around here.”





“Wife, kids?”

“Nope. You?”

“I had a wife,” Nathan said dryly. “We gave each other up. No kids. You know, your sister checked me in. Jo Ellen.”

“Did she?” Brian brought the pot over to top off Nathan’s cup. “She just got here herself about a week ago. Lex is here, too. We’re one big happy family.”

As Brian turned away, Nathan lifted his eyebrows at the tone. “Your dad?”

“You couldn’t dynamite him off Desire. He doesn’t even go over to the mainland for supplies anymore. You’ll see him wandering around.” He glanced over as Lexy swung through the door.

“We’ve got a couple of early birds panting for coffee,” she began. Then, spotting Nathan, she paused. Automatically she flipped back her hair, angled her head, and aimed a flirtatious smile. “Well, kitchen company.” She strolled closer to pose against the counter and give him a whiff of the Eternity she’d rubbed on her throat from a magazine sample that morning. “You must be special if Brian’s let you into his domain.”

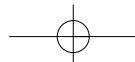
Nathan’s hormones did the quick, instinctive dance that made him want to laugh at both of them. A gorgeous piece of fluff was his first impression, but he revised it when he took a good look into her eyes. They were sharp and very self-aware. “He took pity on an old friend,” Nathan told her.

“Really.” She liked the rough-edged look of him, and pleased herself by basking in the easy male approval on his face. “Well, then, Brian, introduce me to your old friend. I didn’t know you had any.”

“Nathan Delaney,” Brian said shortly, going over to fetch the second pot of freshly brewed coffee. “My kid sister, Lexy.”

“Nathan.” Lexy offered a hand she’d manicured in Flame Red. “Brian still sees me in pigtails.”

“Big brother’s privilege.” It surprised Nathan to find the



siren's hand firm and capable. "Actually, I remember you in pig-tails myself."

"Do you?" Mildly disappointed that he hadn't lingered over her hand, Lexy folded her elbows on the bar and leaned toward him. "I can't believe I've forgotten you. I make it a policy to remember all the attractive men who've come into my life. However briefly."

"You were barely out of diapers," Brian put in, his voice dripping sarcasm, "and hadn't polished your femme-fatale routine yet. Cheese and mushroom omelettes are the breakfast special," he told her, ignoring the vicious look she shot in his direction.

She caught herself before she snarled, made her lips curve up. "Thanks, sugar." She purred it as she took the coffeepot he thrust at her, then she fluttered her lashes at Nathan. "Don't be a stranger. We get so few interesting men on Desire."

Because it seemed foolish to resist the treat, and she seemed so obviously to expect it, Nathan watched her sashay out, then turned back to Brian with a slow grin. "That's some baby sister you've got there, Bri."

"She needs a good wallop. Coming on to strange men that way."

"It was a nice side dish with my omelette." But Nathan held up a hand as Brian's eyes went hot. "Don't worry about me, pal. That kind of heartthrob means major headaches. I've got enough problems. You can bet your ass I'll look, but I don't plan to touch."

"None of my business," Brian muttered. "She's bound and determined not just to look for trouble but to find it."

"Women who look like that usually slide their way out of it too." He swiveled when the door opened again. This time it was Jo who walked through it.

And women who look like that, Nathan thought, don't slide out of trouble. They punch their way out.

He wondered why he preferred that kind of woman, and that kind of method.

Jo stopped when she saw him. Her brows drew together



before she deliberately smoothed her forehead. “You look right at home, Mr. Delaney.”

“Feeling that way, Miss Hathaway.”

“Well, that’s pretty formal,” Brian commented as he reached for a clean mug, “for a guy who pushed her into the river, then got a bloody lip for his trouble when he tried to fish her out again.”

“I didn’t push her in.” Nathan smiled slowly as he watched Jo’s brows knit again. “She slipped. But she did bloody my lip and call me a Yankee pig bastard, as I recall.”

The memory circled around her mind, nearly skipped away, then popped clear. Hot summer afternoon, the shock of cool water, head going under. And coming up swinging. “You’re Mr. David’s boy.” The warmth spread in her stomach and up to her heart. For a moment her eyes reflected it and made his pulse trip. “Which one?”

“Nathan, the older.”

“Of course.” She skimmed her hair back, not with the studied seductiveness of her sister but with absentminded impatience. “And you did push me. I never fell in the river unless I wanted to or was helped along.”

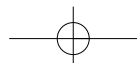
“You slipped,” Nathan corrected, “then I helped you along.”

She laughed, a quick, rich chuckle, then took the mug Brian offered. “I suppose I can let bygones be, since I gave you a fat lip—and your father gave me the world.”

Nathan’s head began to throb, fast and vicious. “My father?”

“I dogged him like a shadow, pestered him mercilessly about how he took pictures, why he took the ones he did, how the camera worked. He was so patient with me. I must have been driving him crazy, interrupting his work that way, but he never shooed me away. He taught me so much, not just the basics but how to look and how to see. I suppose I owe him for every photograph I’ve ever taken.”

The breakfast he’d just eaten churned greasily in his stomach. “You’re a professional photographer?”





“Jo’s a big-deal photographer,” Lexy said with a bite in her voice as she came back in. “The globe-trotting J. E. Hathaway, snapping her pictures of other people’s lives as she goes. Two omelettes, Brian, two sides of hash browns, one bacon, one sausage. Room 201’s having breakfast, Miss World Traveler. You’ve got beds to strip.”

“Exit, stage left,” Jo murmured when Lexy strode out again. “Yes,” she said, turning back to Nathan. “Thanks in large part to David Delaney, I’m a photographer. If it hadn’t been for Mr. David, I might be as frustrated and pissed off at the world as Lexy. How is your father?”

“He’s dead,” Nathan said shortly and pushed himself up from the stool. “I’ve got to get back. Thanks for breakfast, Brian.”

He went out fast, letting the screen door slam behind him.

“Dead? Bri?”

“An accident,” Brian told her. “About three months ago. Both his parents. And he lost his brother about a month later.”

“Oh, God.” Jo ran a hand over her face. “I put my foot in that. I’ll be back in a minute.”

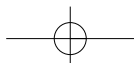
She set the mug down and raced out the door to chase Nathan down. “Nathan! Nathan, wait a minute.” She caught him on the shell path that wound through the garden toward the trees. “I’m sorry.” She put a hand on his arm to stop him. “I’m so sorry I went on that way.”

He pulled himself in, fought to think clearly over the pounding in his temples. “It’s all right. I’m still a little raw there.”

“If I’d known—” She broke off, shrugged her shoulders helplessly. She’d likely have put her foot in it anyway, she decided. She’d always been socially clumsy.

“You didn’t.” Nathan clamped down on his own nerves and gave the hand still on his arm a light squeeze. She looked so distressed, he thought. And she’d done nothing more than accidentally scrape an open wound. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I wish I’d managed to keep in touch with him.” Her voice



went wistful now. “I wish I’d made more of an effort so I could have thanked him for everything he did for me.”

“Don’t.” He bit the word off, swung around to her with his eyes fierce and cold. “Thanking someone for where your life ended up is the same as blaming them for it. We’re all responsible for ourselves.”

Uneasy, she backed off a step. “True enough, but some people influence what roads we take.”

“Funny, then, that we’re both back here, isn’t it?” He stared beyond her to Sanctuary, where the windows glinted in the sun. “Why are you back here, Jo?”

“It’s my home.”

He looked back at her, pale cheeks, bruised eyes. “And that’s where you come when you feel beat up and lost and unhappy?”

She folded her arms across her chest as if chilled. She, usually the observer, didn’t care to be observed quite so clear-sightedly. “It’s just where you go.”

“It seems we decided to come here at almost the same time. Fate? I wonder—or luck.” He smiled a little because he was going to go with the latter.

“Coincidence.” She preferred it. “Why are you back here?”

“Damned if I know.” He exhaled between his teeth, then looked at her again. He wanted to soothe that sorrow and worry from her eyes, hear that laugh again. He was suddenly very certain it would ease his soul as much as hers. “But since I am, why don’t you walk me back to the cottage?”

“You know the way.”

“It’d be a nicer walk with company. With you.”

“I told you I’m not interested.”

“I’m telling you I am.” His smile deepened as he reached up to tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “It’ll be fun seeing who nudges who to the other side.”

Men didn’t flirt with her. Ever. Or not that she had ever noticed. The fact that he was doing just that, and she noticed,



only irritated her. The inherent Pendleton Fault Line dug between her brows. “I’ve got work to do.”

“Right. Bed stripping in 201. See you around, Jo Ellen.”

Because he turned away first, she had the opportunity to watch him walk into the trees. Deliberately she shook her hair so that it fell over her ears again. Then she rolled her shoulders as if shrugging off an unwelcome touch.

But she was forced to admit she was already more interested than she wanted to be.

