

TWO

AT first light the air was misty, like a dream just about to vanish. Beams of light stabbed through the canopy of live oaks and glittered on the dew. The warblers and buntings that nested in the sprays of moss were waking, chirping out a morning song. A cock cardinal, a red bullet of color, shot through the trees without a sound.

It was his favorite time of day. At dawn, when the demands on his time and energy were still to come, he could be alone, he could think his thoughts. Or simply be.

Brian Hathaway had never lived anywhere but Desire. He'd never wanted to. He'd seen the mainland and visited big cities. He'd even taken an impulsive vacation to Mexico once, so it could be said he'd visited a foreign land.

But Desire, with all its virtues and flaws, was his. He'd been born there on a gale-tossed night in September thirty years before. Born in the big oak tester bed he now slept in, delivered by his own father and an old black woman who had smoked a corn cob pipe and whose parents had been house slaves, owned by his ancestors.

The old woman's name was Miss Effie, and when he was very young she often told him the story of his birth. How the wind had howled and the seas had tossed, and inside the great house,

in that grand bed, his mother had borne down like a warrior and shot him out of her womb and into his father's waiting arms with a laugh.

It was a good story. Brian had once been able to imagine his mother laughing and his father waiting, wanting to catch him.

Now his mother was long gone and old Miss Effie long dead. It had been a long, long time since his father had wanted to catch him.

Brian walked through the thinning mists, through huge trees with lichen vivid in pinks and red on their trunks, through the cool, shady light that fostered the ferns and shrubby palmettos. He was a tall, lanky man, very much his father's son in build. His hair was dark and shaggy, his skin tawny, and his eyes cool blue. He had a long face that women found melancholy and appealing. His mouth was firm and tended to brood more than smile.

That was something else women found appealing—the challenge of making those lips curve.

The slight change of light signaled him that it was time to start back to Sanctuary. He had to prepare the morning meal for the guests.

Brian was as contented in the kitchen as he was in the forest. That was something else his father found odd about him. And Brian knew—with some amusement—that Sam Hathaway wondered if his son might be gay. After all, if a man liked to cook for a living, there must be something wrong with him.

If they'd been the type to discuss such matters openly, Brian would have told him that he could enjoy creating a perfect meringue and still prefer women for sex. He simply wasn't inclined toward intimacy.

And wasn't that tendency toward distance from others a Hathaway family trait?

Brian moved through the forest, as quietly as the deer that walked there. Suiting himself, he took the long way around, detouring by Half Moon Creek, where the mists were rising up



from the water like white smoke and a trio of does sipped contentedly in the shimmering and utter silence.

There was time yet, Brian thought. There was always time on Desire. He indulged himself by taking a seat on a fallen log to watch the morning bloom.

The island was only two miles across at its widest, less than thirteen from point to point. Brian knew every inch of it, the sun-bleached sand of the beaches, the cool, shady marshes with their ancient and patient alligators. He loved the dune swales, the wonderful wet, undulating grassy meadows banked by young pines and majestic live oaks.

But most of all, he loved the forest, with its dark pockets and its mysteries.

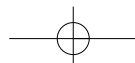
He knew the history of his home, that once cotton and indigo had been grown there, worked by slaves. Fortunes had been reaped by his ancestors. The rich had come to play in this isolated little paradise, hunting the deer and the feral hogs, gathering shells, fishing both river and surf.

They'd held lively dances in the ballroom under the candle glow of crystal chandeliers, gambled carelessly at cards in the game room while drinking good southern bourbon and smoking fat Cuban cigars. They had lazed on the veranda on hot summer afternoons while slaves brought them cold glasses of lemonade.

Sanctuary had been an enclave for privilege, and a testament to a way of life that was doomed to failure.

More fortunes still had gone in and out of the hands of the steel and shipping magnate who had turned Sanctuary into his private retreat.

Though the money wasn't what it had been, Sanctuary still stood. And the island was still in the hands of the descendants of those cotton kings and emperors of steel. The cottages that were scattered over it, rising up behind the dunes, tucked into the shade of the trees, facing the wide swath of Pelican Sound, passed





from generation to generation, ensuring that only a handful of families could claim Desire as home.

So it would remain.

His father fought developers and environmentalists with equal fervor. There would be no resorts on Desire, and no well-meaning government would convince Sam Hathaway to make his island a national preserve.

It was, Brian thought, his father's monument to a faithless wife. His blessing and his curse.

Visitors came now, despite the solitude, or perhaps because of it. To keep the house, the island, the trust, the Hathaways had turned part of their home into an inn.

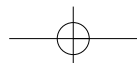
Brian knew Sam detested it, resented every footfall on the island from an outsider. It was the only thing he could remember his parents arguing over. Annabelle had wanted to open the island to more tourists, to draw people to it, to establish the kind of social whirl her ancestors had once enjoyed. Sam had insisted on keeping it unchanged, untouched, monitoring the number of visitors and overnight guests like a miser doling out pennies. It was, in the end, what Brian believed had driven his mother away—that need for people, for faces, for voices.

But however much his father tried, he couldn't hold off change any more than the island could hold back the sea.

Adjustments, Brian thought as the deer turned as a unit and bounded into the concealing trees. He didn't care for adjustments himself, but in the case of the inn they had been necessary. And the fact was, he enjoyed the running of it, the planning, the implementing, the routine. He liked the visitors, the voices of strangers, observing their varying habits and expectations, listening to the occasional stories of their worlds.

He didn't mind people in his life—as long as they didn't intend to stay. In any case, he didn't believe people stayed in the long run.

Annabelle hadn't.



Brian rose, vaguely irritated that a twenty-year-old scar had unexpectedly throbbed. Ignoring it, he turned away and took the winding upward path toward Sanctuary.

When he came out of the trees, the light was dazzling. It struck the spray of a fountain and turned each individual drop into a rainbow. He looked at the back end of the garden. The tulips were rioting dependably. The sea pinks looked a little shaggy, and the . . . what the hell was that purple thing anyway? he asked himself. He was a mediocre gardener at best, struggling constantly to keep up the grounds. Paying guests expected tended gardens as much as they expected gleaming antiques and fine meals.

Sanctuary had to be kept in tip-top shape to lure them, and that meant endless hours of work. Without paying guests, there would be no means for upkeep on Sanctuary at all. So, Brian thought, scowling down at the flowers, it was an endless cycle, a snake swallowing its own tail. A trap without a key.

“Ageratum.”

Brian’s head came up. He had to squint against the sunlight to bring the woman into focus. But he recognized the voice. It irritated him that she’d been able to walk up behind him that way. Then again, he always viewed Dr. Kirby Fitzsimmons as a minor irritation.

“Ageratum,” she repeated, and smiled. She knew she annoyed him, and considered it progress. It had taken nearly a year before she’d been able to get even that much of a reaction from him. “The flower you’re glaring at. Your gardens need some work, Brian.”

“I’ll get to it,” he said and fell back on his best weapon. Silence.

He never felt completely easy around Kirby. It wasn’t just her looks, though she was attractive enough if you went for the delicate blond type. Brian figured it was her manner, which was the direct opposite of delicate. She was efficient, competent, and seemed to know a little about every damn thing.

Her voice carried what he thought of as high-society New England. Or, when he was feeling less charitable, damn Yankee. She had those Yankee cheekbones, too. They set off sea-green eyes and a slightly turned-up nose. Her mouth was full—not too wide, not too small. It was just one more irritatingly perfect thing about her.

He kept expecting to hear that she'd gone back to the mainland, closed up the little cottage she'd inherited from her granny and given up on the notion of running a clinic on the island. But month after month she stayed, slowly weaving herself into the fabric of the place.

And getting under his skin.

She kept smiling at him, with that mocking look in her eyes, as she pushed back a soft wave of the wheat-colored hair that fell smoothly to her shoulders. "Beautiful morning."

"It's early." He stuck his hands in his pockets. He never knew quite what to do with them around her.

"Not too early for you." She angled her head. Lord, he was fun to look at. She'd been hoping to do more than look for months, but Brian Hathaway was one of the natives of this little spit of land that she was having trouble winning over. "I guess breakfast isn't ready yet."

"We don't serve till eight." He figured she knew that as well as he did. She came around often enough.

"I suppose I can wait. What's the special this morning?"

"Haven't decided." Since there was no shaking her off, he resigned himself when she fell into step beside him.

"My vote's for your cinnamon waffles. I could eat a dozen." She stretched, linking her fingers as she lifted her arms overhead.

He did his best not to notice the way her cotton shirt strained over small, firm breasts. Not noticing Kirby Fitzsimmons had become a full-time job. He wound around the side of the house, through the spring blooms that lined the path of crushed shells. "You can wait in the guest parlor, or the dining room."



“I’d rather sit in the kitchen. I like watching you cook.” Before he could think of a way around it, she’d stepped up into the rear screened porch and through the kitchen door.

As usual, it was neat as a pin. Kirby appreciated tidiness in a man, the same way she appreciated good muscle tone and a well-exercised brain. Brian had all three qualities, which was why she was interested in what kind of lover he’d make.

She figured she would find out eventually. Kirby always worked her way toward a goal. All she had to do was keep chipping away at that armor of his.

It wasn’t disinterest. She’d seen the way he watched her on the rare occasions when his guard was down. It was sheer stubbornness. She appreciated that as well. And the contrasts of him were such fun.

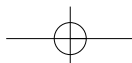
She knew as she settled on a stool at the breakfast bar that he would have little to say unless she prodded. That was the distance he kept between himself and others. And she knew he would pour her a cup of his really remarkable coffee, and remember that she drank it light. That was his innate hospitality.

Kirby let him have his quiet for a moment as she sipped the coffee from the steaming mug he’d set before her. She hadn’t been teasing when she’d said she liked to watch him cook.

A kitchen might have been a traditionally female domain, but this kitchen was all male. Just like its overseer, Kirby thought, with his big hands, shaggy hair, and tough face.

She knew—because there was little that one person on the island didn’t know about the others—that Brian had had the kitchen redone about eight years before. And he’d created the design, chosen the colors and materials. Had made it a working man’s room, with long granite-colored counters and glittering stainless steel.

There were three wide windows, framed only by curved and carved wood trim. A banquette in smoky gray was tucked under them for family meals, though, as far as she knew, the Hathaways



rarely ate as a family. The floor was creamy white tile, the walls white and unadorned. No fancy work for Brian.

Yet there were homey touches in the gleam of copper pots that hung from hooks, the hanks of dried peppers and garlic, the shelf holding antique kitchen tools. She imagined he thought of them as practical rather than homey, but they warmed the room.

He'd left the old brick hearth alone, and it brought back reminders of a time when the kitchen had been the core of this house, a place for gathering, for lingering. She liked it in the winter when he lighted a fire there and the scent of wood burning mixed pleasurably with that of spicy stews or soups bubbling.

To her, the huge commercial range looked like something that required an engineering degree to operate. Then again, her idea of cooking was taking a package from the freezer and nuking it in the microwave.

"I love this room," she said. He was whipping something in a large blue bowl and only grunted. Taking that as a response, Kirby slid off the stool to help herself to a second cup of coffee. She leaned in, just brushing his arm, and grinned at the batter in the bowl. "Waffles?"

He shifted slightly. Her scent was in his way. "That was what you wanted, wasn't it?"

"Yeah." Lifting her cup, she smiled at him over the rim. "It's nice to get what you want. Don't you think?"

She had the damndest eyes, he thought. He'd believed in mermaids as a child. All of them had had eyes like Kirby's. "It's easy enough to get it if all you want is waffles."

He stepped back, around her, and took a waffle iron out of a lower cabinet. After he'd plugged it in, he turned, and bumped into her. Automatically he lifted a hand to her arm to steady her. And left it there.

"You're underfoot."

She eased forward, just a little, pleased by the quick flutter in her stomach. "I thought I could help."

“With what?”

She smiled, let her gaze wander down to his mouth, then back. “With whatever.” What the hell, she thought, and laid her free hand on his chest. “Need anything?”

His blood began to pump faster. His fingers tightened on her arm before he could prevent it. He thought about it, oh, he thought about it. What would it be like to push her back against the counter and take what she kept insisting on putting under his nose?

That would wipe the smirk off her face.

“You’re in my way, Kirby.”

He had yet to let her go. That, she thought, was definite progress. Beneath her hand his heartbeat was accelerated. “I’ve been in your way the best part of a year, Brian. When are you going to do something about it?”

She saw his eyes flicker before they narrowed. Her breathing took on an anticipatory hitch. *Finally*, she thought and leaned toward him.

He dropped her arm and stepped back, the move so unexpected and abrupt that this time she did nearly stumble. “Drink your coffee,” he said. “I’ve got work to do here.”

He had the satisfaction of seeing that he’d pushed one of her buttons for a change. The smirk was gone, all right. Her delicate brows were knit, and under them her eyes had gone dark and hot.

“Damn it, Brian. What’s the problem?”

Deftly, he ladled batter onto the heated waffle iron. “I don’t have a problem.” He slanted a look at her as he closed the lid. Her color was up and her mouth was thinned. Spitting mad, he thought. Good.

“What do I have to do?” She slammed her coffee cup down, sloshing the hot liquid onto his spotless counter. “Do I have to stroll in here naked?”

His lips twitched. “Well, now, that’s a thought, isn’t it? I could



raise the rates around here after that.” He cocked his head. “That is, if you look good naked.”

“I look *great* naked, and I’ve given you numerous opportunities to find that out for yourself.”

“I guess I like to make my own opportunities.” He opened the refrigerator. “You want eggs with those waffles?”

Kirby clenched her fists, reminded herself that she’d taken a vow to heal, not harm, then spun on her heel. “Oh, stuff your waffles,” she muttered and stalked out the back door.

Brian waited until he heard the door slam before he grinned. He figured he had come out on top of that little tussle of wills and decided to treat himself to her waffles. He was just flipping them onto a plate when the door swung open.

Lexy posed for a moment, which both she and Brian knew was out of habit rather than an attempt to impress her brother. Her hair was a tousled mass of spiraling curls that flowed over her shoulders in her current favorite shade, Renaissance Red.

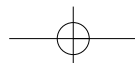
She liked the Titian influence and considered it an improvement over the Bombshell Blonde she’d worn the last few years. That was, she’d discovered, a bitch to maintain.

The color was only a few shades lighter and brighter than what God had given her, and it suited her skin tones, which were milky with a hint of rose beneath. She’d inherited her father’s changeable hazel eyes. This morning they were heavy, the color of cloudy seas, and already carefully accented with mascara and liner.

“Waffles,” she said. Her voice was a feline purr she’d practiced religiously and made her own. “Yum.”

Unimpressed, Brian cut the first bite as he stood, and shoveled it into his mouth. “Mine.”

Lexy tossed back her gypsy mane of hair, strolled over to the breakfast bar and pouted prettily. She fluttered her lashes and smiled when Brian set the plate in front of her. “Thanks, sweetie.” She laid a hand on his cheek and kissed the other.





Lexy had the very un-Hathaway-like habit of touching, kissing, hugging. Brian remembered that after their mother had left, Lexy had been like a puppy, always leaping into someone's arms, looking for a snuggle. Hell, he thought, she'd only been four. He gave her hair a tug and handed her the syrup.

"Anyone else up?"

"Mmm. The couple in the blue room are stirring. Cousin Kate was in the shower."

"I thought you were handling the breakfast shift this morning."

"I am," she told him with her mouth full.

He lifted a brow, skimmed his gaze over her short, thin, wildly patterned robe. "Is that your new waitress uniform?"

She crossed long legs and slipped another bite of waffle between her lips. "Like it?"

"You'll be able to retire on the tips."

"Yeah." She gave a half laugh and pushed at the waffles on her plate. "That's been my lifelong dream—serving food to strangers and clearing away their dirty plates, saving the pocket change they give me so I can retire in splendor."

"We all have our little fantasies," Brian said lightly and set a cup of coffee, loaded with cream and sugar, beside her. He understood her bitterness and disappointment, even if he didn't agree with it. Because he loved her, he cocked his head and said, "Want to hear mine?"

"Probably has something to do with winning the Betty Crocker recipe contest."

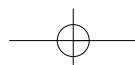
"Hey, it could happen."

"I was going to be somebody, Bri."

"You are somebody. Alexa Hathaway, Island Princess."

She rolled her eyes before she picked up her coffee. "I didn't last a year in New York. Not a damn year."

"Who wants to?" The very idea gave him the creeps. Crowded streets, crowded smells, crowded air.





“It’s a little tough to be an actress on Desire.”

“Honey, you ask me, you’re doing a hell of a job of it. And if you’re going to sulk, take the waffles up to your room. You’re spoiling my mood.”

“It’s easy for you.” She shoved the waffles away. Brian nabbed the plate before it slid off the counter. “You’ve got what you want. Living in nowhere day after day, year after year. Doing the same thing over and over again. Daddy’s practically given the house over to you so he can tromp around the island all day to make sure nobody moves so much as one grain of his precious sand.”

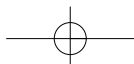
She pushed herself up from the stool, flung out her arms. “And Jo’s got what she wants. Big-fucking-deal photographer, traveling all over the world to snap her pictures. But what do I have? Just what do I have? A pathetic résumé with a couple of commercials, a handful of walk-ons, and a lead in a three-act play that closed in Pittsburgh on opening night. Now I’m stuck here again, waiting tables, changing other people’s sheets. And I hate it.”

He waited a moment, then applauded. “Hell of a speech, Lex. And you know just what words to punch. You might want to work on the staging, though. The gestures lean toward grandiose.”

Her lips trembled, then firmed. “Damn you, Bri.” She jerked her chin up before stalking out.

Brian picked up her fork. Looked like he was two for two that morning, he thought, and decided to finish off her breakfast as well.

WITHIN an hour Lexy was all smiles and southern sugared charm. She was a skilled waitress—which had saved her from total poverty during her stint in New York—and served her tables with every appearance of pleasure and unhurried grace.





She wore a trim skirt just short enough to irritate Brian, which had been her intention, and a cap-sleeved sweater that she thought showed off her figure to best advantage. She had a good one and worked hard to keep it that way.

It was a tool of the trade whether waitressing or acting. As was her quick, sunny smile.

“Why don’t I warm that coffee up for you, Mr. Benson? How’s your omelette? Brian’s an absolute wonder in the kitchen, isn’t he?”

Since Mr. Benson seemed so appreciative of her breasts, she leaned over a bit further to give him full bang for his buck before moving to the next table.

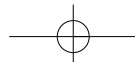
“You’re leaving us today, aren’t you?” She beamed at the newlyweds cuddling at a corner table. “I hope y’all come back and see us again.”

She sailed through the room, gauging when a customer wanted to chat, when another wanted to be left alone. As usual on a weekday morning, business was light and she had plenty of opportunity to play the room.

What she wanted to play was packed houses, those grand theaters of New York. Instead, she thought, keeping that summer-sun smile firmly in place, she was cast in the role of waitress in a house that never changed, on an island that never changed.

It had all been the same for hundreds of years, she thought. Lexy wasn’t a woman who appreciated history. As far as she was concerned, the past was boring and as tediously carved in stone as Desire and its scattering of families.

Pendletons married Fitzsimmonses or Brodies or Verdons. The island’s Main Four. Occasionally one of the sons or daughters took a detour and married a mainlander. Some even moved away, but almost invariably they remained, living in the same cottages generation after generation, sprinkling a few more names among the permanent residents.





It was all so . . . predictable, she thought, as she flipped her order pad brightly and beamed down at her next table.

Her mother had married a mainlander, and now the Hathaways reigned over Sanctuary. It was the Hathaways who had lived there, worked there, sweated time and blood over the keeping of the house and the protection of the island for more than thirty years now.

But Sanctuary still was, and always would be, the Pendleton house, high on the hill.

And there seemed to be no escaping from it.

She stuffed tips into her pocket and carried dirty plates away. The minute she stepped into the kitchen, her eyes went frigid. She shed her charm like a snake sheds its skin. It only infuriated her more that Brian was impervious to the cold shoulder she jammed in his face.

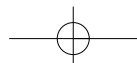
She dumped the dishes, snagged the fresh pot of coffee, then swung back into the dining room.

For two hours she served and cleared and replaced setups—and dreamed of where she wanted to be.

Broadway. She'd been so sure she could make it. Everyone had told her she had a natural talent. Of course, that was before she went to New York and found herself up against hundreds of other young women who'd been told the same thing.

She wanted to be a serious actress, not some airheaded bimbo who posed for lingerie ads and billed herself as an actress-model. She'd fully expected to start at the top. After all, she had brains and looks and talent.

Her first sight of Manhattan had filled her with a sense of purpose and energy. It was as if it had been waiting for her, she thought, as she calculated the tab for table six. All those people, and that noise and vitality. And, oh, the stores with those gorgeous clothes, the sophisticated restaurants, and the overwhelming sense that everyone had something to do, somewhere to go in a hurry.





She had something to do and somewhere to go too.

Of course, she'd rented an apartment that had cost far too much. But she hadn't been willing to settle for some cramped little room. She treated herself to new clothes at Bendel's, and a full day at Elizabeth Arden. That ate a large chunk out of her budget, but she considered it an investment. She wanted to look her best when she answered casting calls.

Her first month was one rude awakening after another. She'd never expected so much competition, or such desperation on the faces of those who lined up with her to audition for part after part.

And she did get a few offers—but most of them involved her auditioning on her back. She had too much pride and too much self-confidence for that.

Now that pride and self-confidence and, she was forced to admit, her own naïveté, had brought her full circle.

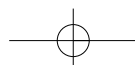
But it was only temporary, Lexy reminded herself. In a little less than a year she would turn twenty-five and then she'd come into her inheritance. What there was of it. She was going to take it back to New York, and this time she'd be smarter, more cautious, and more clever.

She wasn't beaten, she decided. She was taking a sabbatical. One day she would stand onstage and feel all that love and admiration from the audience roll over her. Then she would be someone.

Someone other than Annabelle's younger daughter.

She carried the last of the plates into the kitchen. Brian was already putting the place back into shape. No dirty pots and pans cluttered his sink, no spills and smears spoiled his counter. Knowing it was nasty, Lexy turned her wrist so that the cup stacked on top of the plates tipped, spilling the dregs of coffee before it shattered on the tile.

"Oops," she said and grinned wickedly when Brian turned his head.





“You must enjoy being a fool, Lex,” he said coolly. “You’re so good at it.”

“Really?” Before she could stop herself, she let the rest of the dishes drop. They hit with a crash, scattering food and fragments of stoneware all over. “How’s that?”

“Goddamn it, what are you trying to prove? That you’re as destructive as ever? That somebody will always come behind you to clean up your mess?” He stomped to a closet, pulled out a broom. “Do it yourself.” He shoved the broom at her.

“I won’t.” Though she already regretted the impulsive act, she shoved the broom back at him. The colorful Fiestaware was like a ruined carnival at their feet. “They’re your precious dishes. You clean them up.”

“You’re going to clean it up, or I swear I’ll use this broom on your backside.”

“Just try it, Bri.” She went toe-to-toe with him. Knowing she’d been wrong was only a catalyst for standing her ground. “Just try it and I’ll scratch your damn eyes out. I’m sick to death of you telling me what to do. This is my house as much as it is yours.”

“Well, I see nothing’s changed around here.”

Their faces still dark with temper, both Brian and Lexy turned—and stared. Jo stood at the back door, her two suitcases at her feet and exhaustion in her eyes.

“I knew I was home when I heard the crash followed by the happy voices.”

In an abrupt and deliberate shift of mood, Lexy slid her arm through Brian’s, uniting them. “Look here, Brian, another prodigal’s returned. I hope we have some of that fatted calf left.”

“I’ll settle for coffee,” Jo said, and closed the door behind her.

