

# THE SECRET SISTER

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**Sneak Preview Scene**



THE LID WAS dented and hard to get off. Maisey almost wished she'd asked Rafe to remove it before he left. She broke a fingernail before she managed to pry the two pieces apart. Then she found exactly what Rafe had said she'd find—photographs. But these photographs weren't of her. At least, she didn't think so. The subject, a young girl, had the same color eyes and hair, since Maisey's hair had been much lighter when she was that age. Although the resemblance was uncanny, there were distinct differences, too. The girl's forehead was a bit higher, her mouth not quite as wide, her eyes closer together.

Puzzled, Maisey took out picture after picture and studied each one. Despite the similarity of the subject's features, she might've concluded that this girl had no connection to her. That some renter had left the photos in the bungalow years ago and, mysterious though it seemed, they'd wound up in one of the walls—as a subcontractor's joke or an act of spite by a stranger.

Except that her parents were in a few of them, as Rafe had said. That tied her family to the pictures. Seeing her father's likeness made Maisey yearn for him. Malcolm had been patient, kind. She'd been too afraid of her mother to go to Josephine for any type of nurturing. It was her father who'd

provided the love she needed, and she missed his calm, unwavering support. He was the one who'd let her know, with his tacit disapproval, that her mother's and brother's behavior was not acceptable or even usual for most people. Without that, she might've thought *she* was the abnormal one.

She paused to stare at a photo in which the same girl—about two years old—was puckering up to give Malcolm a kiss.

He was obviously close to this child. So *could* it be her? Maybe she wasn't remembering her own baby pictures clearly. Maisey couldn't see Malcolm being quite so loving with anyone else.

Unless it was a member of his extended family. That would account for the likeness—but didn't make much sense. Josephine had never cared for the Lazarows. As a result, they rarely associated with them. And there was another thing. Her father was the youngest of his family, and had married later in life, so his siblings wouldn't have had little kids by the time he met Josephine.

This girl had to be someone on the Coldiron side. Maisey had a lot of cousins, some she knew and some she didn't. Was it possible that her father had once been close to one of those children, someone he hadn't maintained a relationship with?

He could've been different back then, more carefree and demonstrative. There was no doubt that living with Josephine had changed him. Toward the end of his life, he'd seemed downright miserable. Even at seven or eight, Maisey had understood—instinctively, since it was never expressed—that her father was only enduring his marriage for the sake of his children. Secretly, she'd believed he was doing it more for her than Keith. Keith was almost as temperamental as Josephine. Malcolm couldn't relate to him, which was also part of Keith's problems. Unlike her, he hadn't shared a special bond with

their father, had never had that anchor to temper the emotional ups and downs he suffered.

Instantly feeling guilty for acknowledging her father's favoritism, Maisey told herself he'd stayed for both of them. He could've stayed for financial reasons, too. Although she hated to believe her father would let money trap him like that, after having been through a divorce herself, she understood how hard any kind of separation would've been. The Coldirons had the wealth and power to strip him of everything, including his children. And back then, when her grandfather was alive, they'd have been ruthless enough to do it.

Despite the oddness of that photo, it wasn't until she came across another picture, one including Keith, that her heart started to jackhammer in her chest. She hadn't completely discarded the possibility that this child might be her. It remained the most likely explanation. But in this particular photograph, her brother seemed to be about four, and the girl in question stood taller.

Since Maisey was two years younger, and he'd been big for his age, there'd never been a time when she was taller than Keith. She'd never even come close.

That eliminated any lingering doubts Maisey had. She *couldn't* be this child. It was impossible. She could only be the newborn who showed up in a few of the older pictures at the bottom of the stack.

So...who was this girl? And why were they grouped together, posing as if they were siblings?

This *couldn't* be an older sister. She and Keith didn't have a sister. It was always just the two of them.

Or had there once been three?