

THE SECRET SISTER

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Bonus Scene



**Did she once have a sister? Has her mother lied all these years?
Why?**

After a painful divorce, Maisey Lazarow returns to Fairham, the small island off the North Carolina coast where she grew up. She goes there to heal—and to help her brother, Keith, a deeply troubled man who's asked her to come home. But she refuses to stay in the family house. The last person she wants to see is the wealthy, controlling mother she escaped years ago.

Instead, she finds herself living next door to someone else she'd prefer to avoid—Rafe Romero, the wild, reckless boy to whom she lost her virginity at sixteen. He's back on the island, and to her surprise, he's raising a young daughter alone. Maisey's still attracted to him, but her heart's too broken to risk...

Then something even more disturbing happens. She discovers a box of photographs that evoke distant memories of a little girl, a child Keith remembers, too. Maisey believes the girl must've been their sister, but their mother claims there **was** no sister.

Maisey's convinced that child existed. So where is she now?

In the following scene, which takes place before the story starts, Maisey's brother, Keith, confronts their mother about his memories of a secret sister...

Keith Lazarow stood at the window of his mother's bedroom on a chilly, winter morning, looking out to sea. Only fifteen miles long and, at its widest point, ten miles across, Fairham Island wasn't big as far as islands went. Like so many other islands off the coast of South Carolina, it was actually quite small—but Coldiron House, where he'd been raised, wasn't. His grandfather had built this Southern-style mansion on the cliffs overlooking the ocean when he purchased Fairham nearly a hundred years ago. And this room had the best view. So of course it would belong to his mother. Josephine always had the best of everything.

There wasn't much to see outside, though, not with the sky so overcast and the day so drizzly.

“Are you still standing there for a reason?” his mother snapped. He’d received his instructions for what she wanted done at her flower shop this morning; she didn’t like the fact that he wasn’t immediately acting on them.

He nearly told her to go to hell, but managed to choke back the words. Their relationship was precarious enough. Until he could get on his feet, he needed the money, shelter and job she provided. “There’s something I’d like to talk to you about,” he said, turning away from the window to confront her.

She wore an expensive multicolored silk wrap she’d picked up God knew where, probably in Europe since he’d never seen another woman wear one. Only *she* could pull off something so ostentatious without looking gauche.

“Then speak up,” she said. “What is it? Can’t you see I’m busy here?”

Busy? She sat propped up in bed, stroking her little Yorkie while reading yet another magazine. She pored through everything she could find on design, although he couldn’t imagine what more she hoped to learn. His mother had good taste if nothing else, an instinctive elegance that was apparent in everything she bought, kept, wore, even ate.

It helped to have money and to be beautiful. She had both, and she spent a great deal of time making sure that didn’t change.

Too bad she didn’t put nearly as much effort into the things that mattered more—but then, to her, *nothing* mattered more.

Taking a deep breath, Keith shoved his hands in his pockets. “I have these...memories that keep surfacing. Not only do they bother me when I’m awake, they haunt my dreams at night.”

Lowering her magazine, she focused on him for the first time since he'd walked into the room. "*What* memories? I hope we're not going to unearth all the issues we've been through before. Don't you ever get tired of trying to blame *me* for everything that's gone wrong in your life? What about your father? He was alive until you were fifteen."

But like so many other people, Malcolm wasn't strong enough to stand up to her, to stop her. She pretended the beatings she'd given Keith when he was a child had never occurred, and that lack of honesty bothered him more than the abuse itself. He'd been twelve the last time she'd struck him with the belt she'd kept for "disciplinary" purposes, not so young that he couldn't remember it clearly. The pain...and the humiliation. "Don't worry. This isn't about me, Mother."

Her eyes narrowed. She could tell she wasn't going to like this new subject any better.

"I remember someone," he said. "A girl."

"There've been a lot of girls in your life." She covered a yawn with one perfectly manicured hand, but she wasn't bored. He could feel the keenness of her interest. He could also sense her anxiety. For her, the past was a minefield. Moving through it required great caution.

Sadly, the same held true for him. Maybe that was why he'd abused so many substances over the years. What else could numb the pain? Everyone said he was destroying himself, but he felt his mother had done so much damage he hadn't had much of a chance to begin with.

"This was a little girl," he said. "Someone I played with. I can't recall her name. I was hoping you could."

The telltale tightening around her lips sent chills down his spine. He'd put this confrontation off for so long, hadn't been sure he *ever* wanted to have it. What if he learned the truth about the girl who figured in those early hazy memories? And what if the truth was exactly as he feared? What would he do?

Would he use that knowledge to finally bring down the powerful Josephine Lazarow? Or would he protect her for the sake of his own good name and future?

"You've mentioned her before. And I've told you before. I have no clue who you're talking about."

God, she was still pretending. "Are you sure? Because something tells me she was important to both of us."

Josephine sighed dramatically. "Whoever she was, she wasn't important to *me*. If she even existed, she was undoubtedly some servant's child."

Part of Keith wanted to take her at her word and leave this conversation where it was. She was lying. That right there told him the subject was better left for dead, like that girl in his memory probably was. And yet his curiosity, his anger and his determination to hold Josephine accountable for *something* compelled him to push a little harder. "No, she was more like a sister. An equal. Someone I loved."

The silence stretched uncomfortably. Then Josephine picked up her magazine. "You must be thinking of Maisey."

"No. Maisey's in some of the memories, too, as a baby. This was an older sister."

“Now you’re talking crazy. If you had another sister, don’t you think you’d know it?”

He *did* know it. Deep down. That was the problem. No matter how many times she denied it, no matter how many times he told himself that child had to be a cousin or belong to one of their servants, as she’d suggested, his heart wouldn’t accept it. “I think her name was Annabelle.”

Josephine lifted her eyes again. “I thought you couldn’t remember her name.”

“It just came to me.”

“I’ve never heard of an Annabelle.” Her eyes glittered as she stared at him, almost daring him to call her a liar.

He was tempted. But he was also scared. Had she hurt Annabelle the way she’d hurt him?

He could’ve asked his younger sister about this, called her right then and there, brought her into the conversation. Except that Maisey wasn’t speaking to Josephine and hadn’t for a number of years. Besides, if *he* could barely remember Annabelle, he doubted she’d have any recollection at all.

At any rate, Maisey had never mentioned a third Lazarow child, and he’d always been hesitant to bring it up. Asking Maisey would be like opening Pandora’s box. If she learned there’d once been another child in the house, she wouldn’t let the mystery go. She’d pursue the truth regardless of the consequences—to all of them. It was Maisey who’d stood up to Josephine, married the man she chose despite their mother’s disapproval and walked away from Fairham Island and everything she stood to inherit as a Coldiron-Lazarow.

“Annabelle had blond hair and was tall for her age, thin.”

“Drop it!” His mother’s voice was sharp now that she’d recovered from her surprise. “Psychologists have proven that childhood memories aren’t always reliable. So what’s the point?”

He opened his mouth to say more. He wanted to demand she tell him what had happened. To accuse her. She must’ve done something to Annabelle. Must’ve covered up her actions. He even considered asking where she’d buried the body.

No one *ever* dared speak to Josephine that way. There’d be a severe backlash. But he was willing to weather it, let her rail, threaten him, disown him, throw him out. They’d had their share of arguments in the past, so this wouldn’t be the first.

The only thing that stopped him was the knowledge that by destroying her, he’d be destroying the foundation of his own life. And what good could that do Annabelle—or anyone else—*now*?

“So are you going over to the flower shop or not?” she asked.

He imagined Maisey, living so happily with her husband in New York City. They were expecting a baby. If he was more decisive, more determined, like her, he could break away, too—abandon the whole Coldiron empire and just...drive off into the sunset.

Except, as much as he hated his mother, he loved her, too.

“Yeah. I’m on my way,” he said, and walked out.