

## FOUR

BRIAN stood in the doorway of the west terrace and studied his sister. She looked frail, he noted, skittish. Lost somehow, he thought, amid the sunlight and flowers. She still wore the baggy trousers and oversized lightweight sweater that she'd arrived in, and had added a pair of round wire-framed sunglasses. Brian imagined that Jo wore just such a uniform when she hunted her photographs, but at the moment it served only to add to the overall impression of an invalid.

Yet she'd always been the tough one, he remembered. Even as a child she'd insisted on doing everything herself, on finding the answers, solving the puzzles, fighting the fights.

She'd been fearless, climbing higher in any tree, swimming farther beyond the waves, running faster through the forest. Just to prove she could, Brian mused. It seemed to him Jo Ellen had always had something to prove.

And after their mother had gone, Jo had seemed hell-bent on proving she needed no one and nothing but herself.

Well, Brian decided, she needed something now. He stepped out, saying nothing as she turned her head and looked at him from behind the tinted lenses. Then he sat down on the glider beside her and put the plate he'd brought out in her lap.

"Eat," was all he said.



Jo looked down at the fried chicken, the fresh slaw, the golden biscuit. “Is this the lunch special?”

“Most of the guests went for the box lunch today. Too nice to eat inside.”

“Cousin Kate said you’ve been busy.”

“Busy enough.” Out of habit, he pushed off with his foot and set the glider in motion. “What are you doing here, Jo?”

“Seemed like the thing to do at the time.” She lifted a drumstick, bit in. Her stomach did a quick pitch and roll as if debating whether to accept food. Jo persisted and swallowed. “I’ll do my share, and I won’t get in your way.”

Brian listened to the squeak of the glider for a moment, thought about oiling the hinges. “I haven’t said you were in my way, as I recollect,” he said mildly.

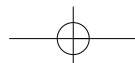
“In Lexy’s way, then.” Jo took another bite of chicken, scowled at the soft-pink ivy geraniums spilling over the edges of a concrete jardiniere carved with chubby cherubs. “You can tell her I’m not here to cramp her style.”

“Tell her yourself.” Brian opened the thermos he’d brought along and poured freshly squeezed lemonade into the lid. “I’m not stepping between the two of you so I can get my ass kicked from both sides.”

“Fine, stay out of it, then.” Her head was beginning to ache, but she took the cup and sipped. “I don’t know why the hell she resents me so much.”

“Can’t imagine.” Brian drawled it before he lifted the thermos and drank straight from the lip. “You’re successful, famous, financially independent, a rising star in your field. All the things she wants for herself.” He picked up the biscuit and broke it in half, handing a portion to Jo as the steam burst out. “I can’t think why that’d put her nose out of joint.”

“I did it by myself for myself. I didn’t work my butt off to get to this point to show her up.” Without thinking, she stuffed a bite of biscuit in her mouth. “It’s not my fault she’s got some childish





fantasy about seeing her name in lights and having people throw roses at her feet.”

“Your seeing it as childish doesn’t make the desire any less real for her.” He held up a hand before Jo could speak. “And I’m not getting in the middle. The two of you are welcome to rip the hide off each other in your own good time. But I’d say right now she could take you without breaking a sweat.”

“I don’t want to fight with her,” Jo said wearily. She could smell the wisteria that rioted over the nearby arched iron trellis—another vivid memory of childhood. “I didn’t come here to fight with anyone.”

“That’ll be a change.”

That lured a ghost of a smile to her lips. “Maybe I’ve mellowed.”

“Miracles happen. Eat your slaw.”

“I don’t remember you being so bossy.”

“I’ve cut back on mellow.”

With what passed as a chuckle, Jo picked up her fork and poked at the slaw. “Tell me what’s new around here, Bri, and what’s the same.” Bring me home, she thought, but couldn’t say it. Bring me back.

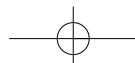
“Let’s see, Giff Verdon built on another room to the Verdon cottage.”

“Stop the presses.” Then Jo’s brow furrowed. “Young Giff, the scrawny kid with the cowlick. The one who was always mooning over Lex?”

“That’s the one. Filled out some, Giff has, and he’s right handy with a hammer and saw. Does all our repair work now. Still moons over Lexy, but I’d say he knows what he wants to do about it now.”

Jo snorted and, without thinking, shoveled in more slaw. “She’ll eat him alive.”

Brian shrugged. “Maybe, but I think she’ll find him tougher to chew up than she might expect. The Sanders girl, Rachel, she





got herself engaged to some college boy in Atlanta. Going to move there come September.”

“Rachel Sanders.” Jo tried to conjure up a mental image. “Was she the one with the lisp or the one with the giggle?”

“The giggle—sharp enough to make the ears bleed.” Satisfied that Jo was eating, Brian stretched an arm over the back of the glider and relaxed. “Old Mrs. Fitzsimmons passed on more than a year back.”

“Old Mrs. Fitzsimmons,” Jo murmured. “She used to shuck oysters on her porch, with that lazy hound of hers sleeping at her feet beside the rocker.”

“The hound passed, too, right after. Guess he didn’t see much point in living without her.”

“She let me take pictures of her,” Jo remembered. “When I was a kid, just learning. I still have them. A couple weren’t bad. Mr. David helped me develop them. I must have been such a pest, but she just sat there in her rocker and let me practice on her.”

Sitting back, Jo fell into the rhythm of the glider, as slow and monotonous as the rhythm of the island. “I hope it was quick and painless.”

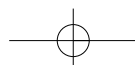
“She died in her sleep at the ripe old age of ninety-six. Can’t do much better than that.”

“No.” Jo closed her eyes, the food forgotten. “What was done with her cottage?”

“Passed down. The Pendletons bought most of the Fitzsimmons land back in 1923, but she owned her house and the little spit of land it sits on. Went to her granddaughter.” Brian lifted the thermos again, drank deeply this time. “A doctor. She’s set up a practice here on the island.”

“We have a doctor on Desire?” Jo opened her eyes, lifted her brows. “Well, well. How civilized. Are people actually going to her?”

“Seems they are, little by little, anyway. She’s dug her toes in.”





“She must be the first new permanent resident here in what, ten years?”

“Thereabouts.”

“I can’t imagine why . . .” Jo trailed off as it struck her. “It’s not Kirby, is it? Kirby Fitzsimmons? She spent summers here a couple of years running when we were kids.”

“I guess she liked it well enough to come back.”

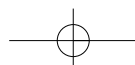
“I’ll be damned. Kirby Fitzsimmons, and a doctor, of all things.” Pleasure bloomed, a surprising sensation she nearly didn’t recognize. “We used to pal around together some. I remember the summer Mr. David came to take photographs of the island and brought his family.”

It cheered her to think of it, the young friend with the quick northern voice, the adventures they’d shared or imagined together. “You would run off with his boys and wouldn’t give me the time of day,” Jo continued. “When I wasn’t pestering Mr. David to let me take pictures with his camera, I’d go off with Kirby and look for trouble. Christ, that was twenty years ago if it was a day. It was the summer that . . .”

Brian nodded, then finished the thought. “The summer that Mama left.”

“It’s all out of focus,” Jo murmured, and the pleasure died out of her voice. “Hot sun, long days, steamy nights so full of sound. All the faces.” She slipped her fingers under her glasses to rub at her eyes. “Getting up at sunrise so I could follow Mr. David around. Bolting down cold ham sandwiches and cooling off in the river. Mama dug out that old camera for me—that ancient box Brownie—and I would run over to the Fitzsimmons cottage and take pictures until Mrs. Fitzsimmons told Kirby and me to scoot. There were hours and hours, so many hours, until the sun went down and Mama called us home for supper.”

She closed her eyes tight. “So much, so many images, yet I can’t bring any one of them really clear. Then she was gone. One morning I woke up ready to do all the things a long





summer day called for, and she was just gone. And there was nothing to do at all.”

“Summer was over,” Brian said quietly. “For all of us.”

“Yeah.” Her hands had gone trembly again. Jo reached in her pockets for cigarettes. “Do you ever think about her?”

“Why would I?”

“Don’t you ever wonder where she went? What she did?” Jo took a jerky drag. In her mind she saw long-lidded eyes empty of life. “Or why?”

“It doesn’t have anything to do with me.” Brian rose, took the plate. “Or you. Or any of us anymore. It’s twenty years past that summer, Jo Ellen, and a little late to worry about it now.”

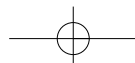
She opened her mouth, then shut it again when Brian turned and walked back into the house. But she was worried about it, she thought. And she was terrified.

LEXY was still steaming as she climbed over the dunes toward the beach. Jo had come back, she was sure, to flaunt her success and her snazzy life. And the fact that she’d arrived at Sanctuary hard on the heels of Lexy’s own failure didn’t strike Lexy as coincidence.

Jo would flap her wings and crow in triumph, while Lexy would have to settle for eating crow. The thought of it made her blood boil as she raced along the tramped-down sand through the dunes, sending sand flying from her sandals.

Not this time, she promised herself. This time she would hold her head up, refuse to be cast as inferior in the face of Jo’s latest triumph, latest trip, latest wonder. She wasn’t going to play the hotshot’s baby sister any longer. She’d outgrown that role, Lexy assured herself. And it was high time everyone realized it.

There was a scattering of people on the wide crescent of beach. They had staked their claims with their blankets and colorful umbrellas. She noted several with the brightly striped box lunches from Sanctuary.





The scents of sea and lotions and fried chicken assaulted her nostrils. A toddler shoveled sand into a red bucket while his mother read a paperback novel in the shade of a portable awning. A man was slowly turning into a lobster under the merciless sun. Two couples she had served that morning were sharing a picnic and laughing together over the clever voice of Annie Lennox on their portable stereo.

She didn't want them—any of them—to be there. On her beach, in her personal crisis. To dismiss them, she turned and walked away from the temporary development, down the curve of beach.

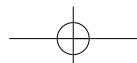
She saw the figure out in the water, the gleam of tanned, wet shoulders, the glint of sun-bleached hair. Giff was a reliable creature of habit, she thought, and he was just exactly what the doctor called for. He invariably took a quick swim during his afternoon break. And, Lexy knew, he had his eye on her.

He hadn't made a secret of it, she mused, and she wasn't one to resent the attentions of an attractive man. Particularly when she needed her ego soothed. She thought a little flirtation, and the possibility of mindless sex, might put the day back on track.

People said her mother had been a flirt. Lexy hadn't been old enough to remember anything more than vague images and soft scents when it came to Annabelle, but she believed she'd come by her skill at flirtation naturally. Her mother had enjoyed looking her best, smiling at men. And if the theory of a secret lover was fact, Annabelle had done more than smile at at least one man.

In any case, that's what the police had concluded after months of investigation.

Lexy thought she was good at sex; she had been told so often enough to consider it a fine personal skill. As far as she was concerned, there was little else that compared to it for shouldering away tension and being the focus of someone's complete attention.





And she liked it, all the hot, slick sensations that went with it. It hardly mattered that most men didn't have a clue whether a woman was thinking about them or the latest Hollywood pretty boy while it was going on. As long as she performed well and remembered the right lines.

Lexy considered herself born to perform.

And she decided it was time to open that velvet curtain for Giff Verdon.

She dropped the towel she'd brought with her onto the packed sand. She didn't have a doubt that he was watching her. Men did. As if onstage, Lexy put her heart into the performance. Standing near the edge of the water, she slipped off her sunglasses, let them fall heedlessly onto the towel. Slowly, she stepped out of her sandals, then, taking the hem of the short-skirted sundress she wore, she lifted it, making the movements a lazy striptease. The bikini underneath covered little more than a stripper's G-string and pasties would have.

Dropping the thin cotton, she shook her head, skimmed her hair back with both hands, then walked with a siren's swagger of hips into the sea.

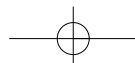
Giff let the next wave roll over him. He knew that every movement, every gesture Lexy made was deliberate. It didn't seem to make any difference. He couldn't take his eyes off her, couldn't prevent his body from going tight and hard and needy as she stood there, all luscious curves and pale gold skin, with her hair spiraling down like sun-kissed flames.

As she walked into the water, and it moved up her body, he imagined what it would be like to rock himself inside her to the rhythm of the waves. She was watching him too, he noted, her eyes picking up the green of the sea, and laughing.

She dipped down, rose up again with her hair shiny and wet, water sliding off her skin. And she laughed out loud.

"Water's cold today," she called out. "And a little rough."

"You don't usually come in till June."





“Maybe I wanted it cold today.” She let the wave carry her closer. “And rough.”

“It’ll be colder and rougher tomorrow,” he told her. “Rain’s coming.”

“Mmm.” She floated on her back a moment, studying the pale blue sky. “Maybe I’ll come back.” Letting her feet sink, she began to tread water as she watched him.

She’d grown accustomed to his dark brown eyes watching her like a puppy when they were teenagers. They were the same age, had grown up all but shoulder to shoulder, but she noticed there had been a few changes in him during her year in New York.

His face had fined down, and his mouth seemed firmer and more confident. The long lashes that had caused the boys to tease him mercilessly in his youth no longer seemed feminine. His light brown hair was needle-straight and streaked from the sun. When he smiled at her, dimples—another curse of his youth—dented his cheeks.

“See something interesting?” he asked her.

“I might.” His voice matched his face, she decided. All grown-up and male. The flutter in her stomach was satisfying, and unexpectedly strong. “I just might.”

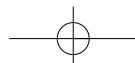
“I figure you had a reason for swimming out here mostly naked. Not that I didn’t enjoy the view, but you want to tell me what it is? Or do you want me to guess?”

She laughed, kicking against the current to keep a teasing distance between them. “Maybe I just wanted to cool off.”

“I imagine so.” He smiled back, satisfied that he understood her better than she could ever imagine. “I heard Jo came in on the morning ferry.”

The smile slid away from her face and left her eyes cold. “So what?”

“So, you want to blow off some steam? Want to use me to do it?” When she hissed at him and started to kick out to swim back



to shore, he merely nipped her by the waist. "I'll oblige you," he said as she tried to wiggle free. "I've been wanting to anyway."

"Get your hands—" The end of her demand was lost in a surprised grunt against his mouth. She'd never expected reliable Giff Verdon to move so quickly, or so decisively.

She hadn't realized his hands were so big, or so hard, or that his mouth would be so . . . sexy as it crushed down on hers with the cool tang of the sea clinging to it. For form's sake she shoved against him, but ruined it with a throaty little moan as her lips parted and invited more.

She tasted exactly as he'd imagined—hot and ready, the sex kitten mouth slippery and wet. The fantasies he'd woven for over ten years simply fell apart and reformed in fresh, wild colors threaded with helpless love and desperate need.

When she wrapped her legs around his waist, rocked her body against his, he was lost.

"I want you." He tore his mouth from hers to race it along her throat while the waves tossed them about and into a tangle of limbs. "Damn you, Lex, you know I've always wanted you."

Water flowed over her head, filled it with roaring. The sea sucked her down, made her giddy. Then she was in the dazzling sunlight again with his mouth fused to hers.

"Now, then. Right now." She panted it out, amazed at how real the need was, that tight, hot little ball of it. "Right here."

He'd wanted her like this as long as he could remember. Ready and willing and eager. His body pulsed toward pain with the need to be in her, and of her. And he knew if he let that need rule, he would take her and lose her in one flash.

Instead he slid his hands down from her waist to cup and knead her bottom, used his thumbs to torment her until her eyes went dark and blind. "I've waited, Lex." And let her go. "So can you."

She struggled to stay above the waves, sputtered out water as she gaped at him. "What the hell are you talking about?"



“I’m not interested in scratching your itch and then watching you walk off purring.” He lifted a hand to push back his dripping hair. “When you’re ready for more than that, you know where to find me.”

“You son of a bitch.”

“You go work off your mad, honey. We’ll talk when you’ve had time to think it through calm.” His hand shot out, grabbed her arm. “When I make love with you, that’s going to be it for both of us. You’ll want to think about that too.”

She shoved his hand away. “Don’t you touch me again, Giff Verdon.”

“I’m going to do more than touch you,” he told her as she dove under to swim toward shore. “I’m going to marry you,” he said, only loud enough for his own ears. He let out a long breath as he watched her stride out of the water. “Unless I kill myself first.”

To ease the throbbing in his system, he sank under the water. But as the taste of her continued to cling to his mouth, he decided he was either the smartest man on Desire or the stupidest.

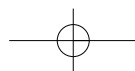
Jo had just drummed up the energy to take a walk and had reached the edges of the garden when Lexy stormed up the path. She hadn’t bothered to towel off, so the little sundress was plastered against her like skin. Jo straightened her shoulders, lifted an eyebrow.

“Well, how’s the water?”

“Go to hell.” Breath heaving, humiliation still stinging, Lexy planted her feet. “Just go straight to hell.”

“I’m beginning to think I’ve already arrived. And so far my welcome’s been pretty much as expected.”

“Why should you expect anything? This place means nothing to you and neither do we.”





“How do you know what means anything to me, Lexy?”

“I don’t see you changing sheets, clearing tables. When’s the last time you scrubbed a toilet or mopped a damn floor?”

“Is that what you’ve been doing this afternoon?” Jo skimmed her gaze up Lexy’s damp and sandy legs to her dripping hair. “Must have been some toilet.”

“I don’t have to explain myself to you.”

“Same goes, Lex.” When Jo started to move past, Lexy grabbed her arm and jerked.

“Why did you come back here?”

Weariness swamped her suddenly, made her want to weep. “I don’t know. But it wasn’t to hurt you. It wasn’t to hurt anybody. And I’m too tired to fight with you now.”

Baffled, Lexy stared at her. The sister she knew would have waded in with words, scraped flesh with sarcasm. She’d never known Jo to tremble and back off. “What happened to you?”

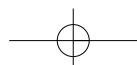
“I’ll let you know when I figure it out.” Jo shook off the hand blocking her. “Leave me alone, and I’ll do the same for you.”

She walked quickly down the path, took its curve toward the sea. She barely glanced at the dune swale with its glistening grasses, never looked up to follow the flight of the gull that called stridently. She needed to think, she told herself. Just an hour or two of quiet thought. She would figure out what to do, how to tell them. If she should tell them at all.

Could she tell them about her breakdown? Could she tell anyone that she’d spent two weeks in the hospital because her nerves had snapped and something in her mind had tilted? Would they be sympathetic, ambivalent, or hostile?

And what did it matter?

How could she tell them about the photograph? No matter how often she was at sword’s point with them, they were her family. How could she put them through that, dredging up the pain and the past? And if any of them demanded to see it, she would have to tell them it was gone.





Just like Annabelle.

Or it had never existed.

They would think her mad. Poor Jo Ellen, mad as a hatter.

Could she tell them she'd spent days trembling inside her apartment, doors locked, after she'd left the hospital? That she would catch herself searching mindlessly, frantically, for the print that would prove she wasn't really ill?

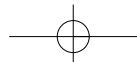
And that she had come home, because she'd finally had to accept that she was ill. That if she had stayed locked in that apartment alone for another day, she would never have found the courage to leave it again.

Still, the print was so clear in her mind. The texture, the tones, the composition. Her mother had been young in the photograph. And wasn't that the way Jo remembered her—young? The long waving hair, the smooth skin? If she was going to hallucinate about her mother, wouldn't she have snapped to just that age?

Nearly the same age she herself was now, Jo thought. That was probably another reason for all the dreams, the fears, the nerves. Had Annabelle been as restless and as edgy as her daughter was? Had there been a lover after all? There had been whispers of that, even a child had been able to hear them. There'd been no hint of one, no suspicion of infidelity before the desertion. But afterward the rumors had been rife, and tongues had clucked and wagged.

But then, Annabelle would have been discreet, and clever. She had given no hint of her plans to leave, yet she had left.

Wouldn't Daddy have known? Jo wondered. Surely a man knew if his wife was restless and dissatisfied and unhappy. She knew they had argued over the island. Had that been enough to do it, to make Annabelle so unhappy that she would turn her back on her home, her husband, her children? Hadn't he seen it, or had he even then been oblivious to the feelings of the people around him?





It was so hard to remember if it had ever been different. But surely there had once been laughter in that house. Echoes of it still lingered in her mind. Quick snapshots of her parents embracing in the kitchen, of her mother laughing, of walking on the beach with her father's hand holding hers.

They were dim pictures, faded with time as if improperly fixed, but they were there. And they were real. If she had managed to block so many memories of her mother out of her mind, then she could also bring them back. And maybe she would begin to understand.

Then she would decide what to do.

The crunch of a footstep made her look up quickly. The sun was behind him, casting him in shadow. A cap shielded his eyes. His stride was loose and leggy.

Another long-forgotten picture snapped into her mind. She saw herself as a little girl with flyaway hair racing down the path, giggling, calling, then leaping high. And his arms had reached out to catch her, to toss her high, then hug her close.

Jo blinked the picture away and the tears that wanted to come with it. He didn't smile, and she knew that no matter how she worked to negate it, he saw Annabelle in her.

She lifted her chin and met his eyes. "Hello, Daddy."

"Jo Ellen." He stopped a foot away and took her measure. He saw that Kate had been right. The girl looked ill, pale, and strained. Because he didn't know how to touch her, didn't believe she would welcome the touch in any case, he dipped his hands into his pockets. "Kate told me you were here."

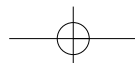
"I came in on the morning ferry," she said, knowing the information was unnecessary.

For a difficult moment they stood there, more awkward than strangers. Sam shifted his feet. "You in trouble?"

"I'm just taking some time off."

"You look peaked."

"I've been working too hard."



Frowning, he looked deliberately at the camera hanging from a strap around her neck. "Doesn't look like you're taking time off to me."

In an absent gesture, she cupped a hand under the camera. "Old habits are hard to break."

"They are that." He huffed out a breath. "There's a pretty light on the water today, and the waves are up. Guess it'd make a nice picture."

"I'll check it out. Thanks."

"Take a hat next time. You'll likely burn."

"Yes, you're right. I'll remember."

He could think of nothing else, so he nodded and started up the path, moving past her. "Mind the sun."

"I will." She turned away quickly, walking blindly now because she had smelled the island on him, the rich, dark scent of it, and it broke her heart.

MILES away in the hot red glow of the darkroom light, he slipped paper, emulsion side up, into a tray of developing fluid. It pleased him to re-create the moment from so many years before, to watch it form on the paper, shadow by shadow and line by line.

He was nearly done with this phase and wanted to linger, to draw out all the pleasure before he moved on.

He had driven her back to Sanctuary. The idea made him chuckle and preen. Nothing could have been more perfect. It was there that he wanted her. Otherwise he would have taken her before, half a dozen times before.

But it had to be perfect. He knew the beauty of perfection and the satisfaction of working carefully toward creating it.

Not Annabelle, but Annabelle's daughter. A perfect circle closing. She would be his triumph, his masterpiece.

Claiming her, taking her, killing her.

And every stage of it would be captured on film. Oh, how Jo

would appreciate that. He could barely wait to explain it all to her, the one person he was certain would understand his ambition and his art.

Her work drew him, and his understanding of it made him feel intimate with her already. And they would become more intimate yet.

Smiling, he shifted the print from the developing tray to the stop bath, swishing it through before lifting it into the fixer. Carefully, he checked the temperature of the wash, waiting patiently until the timer rang and he could switch on the white light and examine the print.

Beautiful, just beautiful. Lovely composition. Dramatic lighting—such a perfect halo over the hair, such lovely shadows to outline the body and highlight skin tones. And the subject, he thought. Perfection.

When the print was fully fixed, he lifted it out of the tray and into the running water of the wash. Now he could allow himself to dream of what was to come.

He was closer to her than ever, linked to her through the photographs that reflected each of their lives. He could barely wait to send her the next. But he knew he must choose the time with great care.

On the worktable beside him a battered journal lay open, its precisely written words faded from time.

*The decisive moment is the ultimate goal in my work. Capturing that short, passing event where all the elements, all the dynamics of a subject reach a peak. What more decisive moment can there be than death? And how much more control can the photographer have over this moment, over the capturing of it on film, than to plan and stage and cause that death? That single act joins subject and artist, makes him part of the art, and the image created.*

*Since I will kill only one woman, manipulate only one decisive moment, I have chosen her with great care.*

*Her name is Annabelle.*



With a quiet sigh, he hung the print to dry and turned on the white light to better study it.

“Annabelle,” he murmured. “So beautiful. And your daughter is the image of you.”

He left Annabelle there, staring, staring, and went out to complete his plans for his stay on Desire.

